



# INDIAN Stories

*Volume 1*

*Compiled and Edited by*  
**K. Sreenivasarao**

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SAHITYA AKADEMI

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## PREFACE

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Stories have been part and parcel of humanity ever since people started living in communities. People have always been telling stories and listening to them. This is one constant activity of human beings and the inherent aspiration to share one's feelings, emotions and thoughts is part of human communication. So, storytelling is the story of humanity. Even after the evolution of human communication, from oral to written form, this activity continued.

Civilizations and nations have been using stories and storytelling traditions as one of the means to preserve their cultures. Stories in every country act as timeless bridge to the history, customs, practices, rituals, legends, myths, indigenous knowledge systems, languages, literature, economy, technology, social conditions and much more of the bygone eras.

Stories enable and empower human beings to understand, relate to and express their emotions and feelings of people around them. Importantly, they contain and express in shortest possible forms the universal truths about the commonalities and oneness of human existence irrespective of place and time.

The stories cut across generations and cultures as they are universal in nature in that they tell the stories of human beings though each story may have local plot,

the events and characters all rooted in the local cultures. In this sense, the stories can be described as accurate yardsticks to find out one's place in the world across the annals of history.

Beyond their objectives and utility, stories are after all perspectives of different people about the world, types of people, feelings, emotions and reactions of people to the events past and present and, as such, act as guides for every current generation of people to learn from the past and from different countries and communities.

This learning through stories is not only about how to face given circumstances that one may encounter in life but also in learning about how not to do things in a particular way in a set or series of circumstances.

Stories offer both positive and negative learning tools for human beings. These aspects make stories definitely universally applicable and relevant much beyond the commonalities of human aspirations and endeavours they by and large represent.

Further, stories also reflect social realities of the times in which they are created. Of course, the same can be said about the poems, plays and movies. Despite the obvious advantage of visual medium in communicating effectively, one should remember that at the root of that advantage lies the story, whether oral or written.

People always like to share their thoughts and always eager to listen or read about the lives, practices, joys, travails and circumstances of actions of other people and communities. That makes story-telling as part of the core of human existence.

Any issue of story-telling is, therefore an issue of ontology. Stories may contain, every now and then, a peep

into psychological reality of people and also metaphysical thoughts.

That is inevitable since the human thoughts and activities are not designed to be content and satisfied with the narrow perspectives and alleys of materialism and material development. Humans always strive to go beyond the phenomena and touch, if not constantly, the rainbows of noumena, the world uncoloured by the proclivities of human brain and all possible projections and subjectivity though stories themselves form part of the subjectivity but stories definitely prevent people from falling into the bottomless abyss of solipsism.

India is a land of stories and the number of languages in which this storytelling has been happening for the past 2,000 years or so makes India a unique and exotic storyland. Innovation and arrival of new genres in the storytelling traditions elsewhere have been embraced with both the hands by the Indian storytellers and the benefactors are readers and listeners who have been treated with grand tales.

Sahitya Akademi, India's premier literary institution, has been publishing stories and novels, in the form of books and also in its three literary journals and has been organizing story-telling programmes throughout the country the languages recognized by it, since inception.

The present volume is the beginning of the series in which we will be presenting a cream of stories by the best writers of India over the past seven decades, and the present volume contains 23 of those stories that were published in our English journal, Indian Literature and one story is from a publication of Sahitya Akademi.

The stories in the present volume with diverse subjects as core and varied plots are from 24 languages of India

and present variegated Indian cultural landscape through different decades. These stories also show how much Indian short stories as a collective voice of the nation with diverse cultural traditions has developed since Independence with each story presenting a different social issue but contains many universal elements to make them relevant and important today as they were at the time they were written.

I sincerely hope the readers enjoy this collection of short stories and also the future volumes in the series.

—K. Sreenivasarao  
*Secretary, Sahitya Akademi*



## THE ROMANTIC

*Harekrishna Deka*

There has been a request to write a story. My mind is usually so slothful that even though I keep thinking that I will write, no story gets penned. But when there is a request for a story, there is pressure on me, and I quickly dash off one. Most of my stories have been penned in this manner. (The word that I have used to denote the request that is made on these occasions, "formaish", is not an Asomiya one. Most likely the spelling is wrong. But this kind of word pops up in the stream of my stories, and I make use of it. Some of my writer friends tell me that fiction writers, or poets, can take this kind of liberty and use words in this manner. Good. And another thing. While writing a story, when subject, object, verb all become arranged in a sentence, I think that the writer called "I" is in control of those words. But the funny thing is that when the controller of words begins to dominate them with his own rules, I lose control over them. I do not mind this, either. When I write obscenities, and others criticize me, I say that it is not I who have written those words. It is the story that has demanded their use. When I write about

wicked people, I can tell that type of wicked person, when he comes after me in real life, that what I have written is a figment of my imagination, only a fiction. If there is a similarity between what I have written and your real life, then that similarity is simply a coincidence. Does anybody else, besides a story writer, have this kind of wonderful freedom to abrogate all responsibility?

But today, while settling down to write a story, I kept remembering you. Repeatedly. Do not be afraid. I am not about to make you the heroine of my story. Today, when I sat down on the open veranda of my house, trying to pen a story, I suddenly remembered you. There is a creeper that climbs up the pillar of my veranda. I do not know its name. Bunches of red flowers cover the creeper in winter. Now, in the rainy season, deep green leaves have come up, strong and fresh. But for some days now, I have been noticing a rather wonderful sight on it. An adorable little bird is building her nest there. Well, not building it, but adorning it. The nest has actually been there for a long time. A family of small birds, red munias, had nested there last year. They have flown off somewhere else, and are not around now. Since the last few days though, this sweet little bird has started to come to this nest. In this rainy season, the lawn in front of my veranda is filled with tall weeds. Since the rain has made the soil soggy and soft, I have not been able to weed the lawn for quite sometime. This new bird is adorning her nest, weed by single weed, which she brings in her beak.

Eh, just look now, how I have feminised the bird, by adding the feminine suffix "Joni" to the word "sorai", "bird". After all, I can not make out by looking at it, whether this small bird is a man or a woman. You must be amused at the phrase "man or woman." But if birds could speak like people, they, too, would probably have used respectful words like these to denote masculinity or

femininity. Somehow, the words "male" and "female" do not seem to be respectful of them. However, nobody has actually decreed that these words should have meanings different from the words "man" and "woman." The shades of difference that these two words denote have been bestowed on them by our feelings, moulded by the culture that we live in.

Ah, I seem to have wandered away quite a bit from the main topic. As I was saying then—why is it that I have assumed the little bird to be a woman? But then mine, after all, is a man's mind. The bird is "adorning" her nest. That bit of work we have kept inviolate for women. If this bird, instead of adorning her nest, had constructed or built it, then perhaps the little bird would have been a man in my eyes, but listen, this little bird really does belong to the tribe of women. While I was sitting on the veranda today and thinking of my story, I noticed another bird fluttering around, trying to capture her attention. He fluttered near her, moving to and fro with strange postures. However, she did not pay any attention to him. She remained busy, engrossed in bringing in the weeds, one by one, to beautify her nest.

Now why have I assumed the other bird to be a male? Well, isn't his behaviour like a young man's? Youths follow young girls in a bid to catch their attention in the same manner. It seems as though behaviour matches gender, always. Yes, well now, I have taken the word gender from grammar, okay?

After a while, I noticed the man bird lose heart in his efforts to get the woman bird to pay attention to him. He moved a little away from her, and began to search for something to eat on the lawn. The woman bird remained engrossed in her work. But the man bird's mind was still full of desire. Under the pretext of foraging among the weeds, he tried to hop closer to her. But the woman bird

took no notice of him. Oh, just look, how this slang word "patta", denoting notice or attention, has crept into this story. This non-Asomiya word looks very odd besides the other words, all dressed in sober clothes, does it not? But what can I do? Since the word has slipped in, let it remain, right?

Let me go back to the two little birds. The man bird continued his efforts. The woman bird suddenly flew into the nest. The man bird went and perched sadly on the branch of a nearby tree. Do you know the thought that came to my mind then? Why is this bird beautifying her nest? Does she not need a family? Or at least a companion? What kind of life will she have all alone in that beautifully decorated nest? In that case, why is she rejecting this bird that is so passionately in love with her? After all, he has done all he can to show her his love.

While I was thinking along these lines, a certain perception came to my mind. The little bird was unable to accept the exhibitionist nature of the man bird. But then, the very nature of man is such. Still, I realized that the woman's heart inside the bird viewed the man's exhibitionist nature with suspicion. While pondering on this matter, suddenly, I remembered you.

Both of us were mature people when we met. I do not know how the feelings of love in my heart were sparked. Still, at age, my mind ought not to have become as restless as a youth's. Perhaps, without my being aware of it, that restlessness had been expressed in my behaviour. I do not know if I got any hints from you to come closer to you. But the kind of excuses I would cook up to be in your vicinity, the kind of stratagems I would take recourse to! Somehow, I had assumed that since I was expressing my feelings of love, I would surely get a response from you. After all, mine is a man's mind! When a man wants something from a woman, it is perhaps routinely assumed that she is bound to give it. Perhaps that was what had

happened to me. Since I was attracted to you I had assumed that you would not remain without responding. It is not that I am of immature mind. Others have noticed that in all other matters I am a calm, thoughtful person. But the love that entered my heart brought with it the rush of youth to my veins.

But worse than that, one day I actually behaved like a youth. Acting in a demonstrative manner, meaning to attract you to me, one day, with a callow teenager's eagerness, I went and questioned you. I do not remember the words, or the kinds of sentences I used, but the gist of my question was, "What was your reply to all the different kinds of heartfelt messages that I had been sending you?"

No mature person would perhaps have acted in this manner. Perhaps people bound by the social code dictated by norms of cultured conduct do not question things in such a manner. Many delightful experiences express the answers to these questions.

This was the reason why my question had a lad's eagerness, in the same way that the first experiences and first occurrences in a young man's life make him pester his guardians for the reasons behind them. Your reply had not been to my liking. You had said something like, "It's best if that secret remains with me..."

I had tried to understand these words, imbuing them with all kinds of meanings. My eagerness increased in the same way as thirst does after one eats something with an astringent taste. The possible explanations of the reply took me along diverse paths. I had become puzzled. I had wondered if you had given me that mysterious, astringent reply in order to increase the thirst of my feelings for you.

Today, as I observe the drama of the birds before me, the motivation of our relationship comes differently to my mind. The woman bird has not been able to easily accept the exhibitionist behaviour of the man bird. She suspects the genuineness of his feelings. I realize now that perhaps

you could not take my varied exhibitionisms before you in your stride. You suspected this male behaviour. Perhaps this is a woman's normal response. The behaviour of the woman bird is giving me some clear signals. However, I am remembering a story. Just now I told you that ultimately, my behaviour was immature, like a youth's. While saying this, I remembered the story of a youth, the story of a particular experience. The incident is true. But when it is enclosed within the bounds of sentences, with specific subjects, predicates and verbs, it becomes a story. This is why I am calling it a story.

The youth's days were of unalloyed happiness. He looked all around at the world before him with enthusiasm, and he saw waves of joy everywhere. The pace of life around him was slow. He lived in a decent house in a growing town. Sharing a wall with his house was another. Somebody had once built both houses as one unit, but later, a long brick wall had been erected to partition the large house into two smaller units, which had been sold to two different people. The young boy's family lived in one of these. The owner of the other house had let it out. This other house had remained vacant for a long time. Even though it was a developing town, there was no arrangement for piped water there. Each home therefore had to make its own arrangements for a regular supply of water, through wells or tube wells. There was a well behind the young boy's house. Nearby was a peepul tree, to which flocked a variety of birds. This portion of the backyard was secluded. The young boy loved the spot, which was separated from the other house by a wall of brick and cement. Perhaps, during construction, mortar had not been properly applied to the wall. A crack had developed in it. Since the other house was vacant, there was no disturbance or noise around. The young boy would spend the silent afternoon hours beside this well, looking at the antics of the birds on the peepul tree, and

grimacing and making faces at his own reflection in the water of the well. This solitary time was the young boy's private space. Later, when he would grow up to be a poet, this daily span of private time would perhaps serve to fuel his inspiration.

One day, while he was solitarily communing with his own reflection in the well, a snatch of melody floated to his ear. It was being hummed by a human voice. Surprised, he looked around, and realized that the humming was coming from the other side of the wall. So somebody had come to the house which had been vacant for so long. He went forward curiously, and looked through the crack in the wall. An unusual sight rooted his feet to the ground. A look of amazement descended on his eyes, his face grew flushed. He saw that a temporary bath house had been constructed with bamboo matting on the other side of the wall. A young woman, several years older than him, was humming and having a bucket bath. The solitariness of the afternoon hour, combined with the privacy afforded by the bamboo matting had made her shed any hesitations or reservations that she may have had. The young woman had therefore uncovered her body while bathing.

The boy had seen many natural scenes before, and had been enthralled by them. When he had gone to Guwahati, he had had the opportunity of witnessing the beautiful sunset over the Brahmaputra. He had seen the splendid beauty of zigzag lightning lancing through a monsoon sky. His father had once shown him the sight of the mountain peaks of Arunachal exposed to the elements and the sky above. But today, the unique attraction of a woman's wordless body had bewildered his own mind and body. He had been suddenly struck with the strange thought that the beauty of this body was insolent with the pride of charming abundance. The joy of witnessing this beauty had filled his heart with a strange, sweet pain that made his mind and body tremble. Much later, when this young

boy would see Botticelli's Venus for the first time, he would remember the sweetly painful beauty of this other silent body. In his mature years, a sense of proportion would come to him, and he would think of the creator of a woman's beauty as an even greater artist than Botticelli.

He was unaware of how long he gazed, stunned, at the beautiful sight before him. When he came to his senses, he felt an acute sense of guilt at having thus secretly looked at the nakedness of the woman. His limbs began to tremble. The conflict in his mind between the joy of witnessing such beauty, and the chastisement of a stern sense of guilt numbed him for the rest of the day.

The teenager had not committed this act intentionally. When, out of curiosity, he had peered through the crack in the wall, he had never thought that a sight such as this would meet his eyes. Perhaps, in due course, Time would have wiped out all traces of this act from his mind. Growing older, he would have seen the beauty of a woman's naked body in the normal course of events. He would not have suffered from any feeling of guilt then. He would liken a woman's ripe body to the beauty of a river in full flow, and declare the former to be the winner. In comparison, gradually the memory of that first glimpse of a woman's body would dim.

But an incident occurred which heightened the teen's guilt further.

Next day, in a social occasion in his own home, he was forced to come face to face with the young girl. The newly arrived neighbours next door had come to meet the youth's family. This visit was a social obligation. The girl was an ideal of polite and correct behaviour. Her dress was careful, her behaviour courteous, and there was a natural soberness in her gait and posture. There was good taste in her manners. Her guardians had tried to raise her as an ideal representative of civilized social norms.

Very soon, the two families became close. The girl did not have a younger brother, and in the natural course of things, she began to look on the youth as her younger sibling. She began to rely on him in the same way as she would have, had he been her own brother. In those days, girls were diffident about going alone on visits to other's homes, or to the market. Society still had evolve to a full liberation in this regard. When she had to go somewhere, therefore, the girl depended on the teenager to escort her. In this way, she became the young boy's *baideo*, elder sister. Off and on, however, the memory of that first glimpse would enter his disobedient mind unbidden, like an uninvited guest. That scene he had witnessed was inconsistent with the purity of their easy relationship. For this reason, his feelings of guilt were acute. One day, when these feelings became very strong, he decided that he would confess to what he had unknowingly done, and ask for her forgiveness. After this, he would wipe off all traces of that scene whose image kept entering the mirror of his mind.

Accordingly, one day he really did go up to her, and confessed to what he had done. He had assumed that she would accept this frank confession without any fuss, and the cordial bond between them would remain as strong as before, for his *baideo*'s trust in him would increase after his confession. But, to his astonishment, his *baideo*'s reaction had been just the opposite. Even while listening to him, she had flushed deeply. Abruptly, she had given him a sound slap on his face, and left. The youth had been astounded. He had not understood the reason for this reaction of hers.

Next day, her behaviour had once more become quite natural and easy. She spoke to him in the same way as before, and asked him to accompany her someplace. In his mind's eye, the youth suddenly saw a firmament darkening with clouds, and then, just as suddenly, clearing

up again. He would always see the similarity of this scene to his *baideo*'s behaviour towards him. But the young boy would grow up one day. He would find new explanations to replace many old ones. Another explanation for his *baideo*'s behaviour would enter his mind. The reason for her sudden eruption of anger was not that a man—even though he was a teenager, he was after all a representative of the male gender—had with secret gaze enjoyed her woman's body, and had thereby wronged her, since he had no right to do so. If, at that time, she had seen that thirsty gaze drinking in her beauty, she would perhaps not have said anything, but hastened away from the place. But when the youth had confessed to what he had done, his words had exposed her in a different manner. Growing up as she had in a social environment within her family setting, she had veiled the natural woman within herself with the cover of behavioural correctness and socially accepted manners. The cultural values that she had imbibed had veiled the native woman in her. The youth's words had ripped that veil off. The carefully nurtured refinement that had created this woman had become confused on coming face to face with this secret woman within her. The natural woman had wished to be thrilled by the male gaze on the luxuriant beauty of her body.

He understood that the woman had become alerted when she had realized that the veil over her behaviour had slipped in this way. Her slap had not been aimed at the youth's cheek. It had been aimed at those words which had pierced through her privacy, and had revealed the naked woman within her body.

The young boy would find consolation in this explanation, but would not know whether it was true or not. While I was telling you the story of this young boy, the memory of the explanation of a sentence you had spoken to me came to my mind. I was telling you the antics of a pair of *bjrd*s before I recounted the story of the young boy and had

found this explanation for the reply that you had given me. Now I am also beginning to get another explanation. I think that the screen of correct behaviour around your natural self veils your mind. I had tried to rip apart that veil with the lance of male behaviour, and searched for the natural woman within. My incoherent behaviour and question had wanted to smash and shatter the screen of correctness over your mind. You had become alert, and readjusted that screen carefully over your psyche. Is this explanation of your words, "It is best if that secret remains with me..." not correct, then? Oh, I forgot, you will not tell me. Of course the possessor of the sentence will not give the explanation of the sentence. But if the person who accepts it receives it in his own way while accepting it, the possessor cannot control it. Therefore I am enjoying the flavour of that explanation in my own way, by taking advantage of the fact that I can accept it in any manner I wish.

I was supposed to have been writing a story. Instead, here I am, writing stuff to you. Perhaps you wish to say, what is all this nonsense? (Nonsense. Here again, I am using the word "abol tabol" to denote the sense of that word. Is *abol tabol Asomiya*, I wonder? Well, what is the harm in using it if a borrowed word conveys the appropriate meaning?)

Wait, wait a minute. While telling you all this, I quite forgot to look at the drama of the birds, and find out what has been happening there. Now I am looking at the birds again. The show involving them continues, but in a somewhat modified form. The woman bird is as busy as before in bringing in bits of greenery in her beak to adorn the nest. She is engrossed in this task. The man bird has changed his strategy. He is not dancing around her in the same agitated way as before to show her his emotions. Instead, he is hopping towards the nest a step at a time, slowly and cautiously. The woman bird flutters

into the nest with a pretty bit of greenery in her beak. She remains inside the nest for quite a while. I begin to think that the man bird will go away disappointed this time, or will sit on the branch of a tree and wait for her as before. But no. Instead, he flies towards the nest, and perches on a twig near it that juts out from the creeper. He looks around a bit. And then he, too, flies down inside her nest. I think that there will be a scuffle between them now in there, with loud screeches. I wait for the noise. But nothing of the kind happens. Peace reigns in the nest. I cannot understand what kind of signal conveyed the woman bird's feelings to him. They share no language to express their feelings. The man bird has understood some subtle signal, and has entered the nest without hesitation, assured of the woman's company.

We human have verbal intercourse through languages made up of words and sentences. But the sense conveyed by that language becomes contrary to what is intended. Will we be able to find the actual meaning of a wordless language conveyed through gestures and signals? Have I not understood even your wordless signal?

You must be quite fed up by now. Instead of telling you a story, here am I babbling on with all this twaddle. Before you accuse me of doing so, let me tell you something. I have fashioned an escape route for myself. I have cleared that path in the first paragraph itself. If you ask me what drivel is this that I've been spouting all this while, I will retort, why have you assumed that all that I have told you is about myself? I am only telling you a story. The action that the subject of a sentence enacts through the verb, or the significance through which it clears the path ahead, is not controlled by the writer. Notice the way I am immersed as a writer in the liberty of this kind of abdication of responsibility. What a fantastic wall is this, which has been erected by words, in such a manner that reality cannot touch the imaginary. All stories are

imaginary. How wonderful! Nobody can touch me if I say that the story that I have told you is imaginary.

But even then the editor may ask, What kind of a romantic story is this? I shall reply, if all romantic imaginings are spontaneous, where then does romantic irony come from?

*Translated from Assamese by Mitra Phukan*



## QUEST FOR THE OFF-BEAT

*Lakshminandan Bora*

At the outset I offer a brief introduction of myself to facilitate an easy comprehension of what I seek to speak about. I am a commoner. This city that has been presently thrown into disarray by a populace of almost two million is teeming with thousands of ordinary mortals like me. These people are striving like me, not in the sense of any noble enterprise, but merely for a hand-to-mouth existence. Perhaps their lives, too, are preoccupied as mine with the fulfilment of the basic needs, such as food, sleep and so on. However, I had not glimpsed in my distant dreams till my twenties that my life would taper off into this sort of a monotone. I fully devoted myself to my studies keeping my mind illumined with multihued dreams with a keen eye on my health and physique as well. Even now I firmly believe that the body and the mind have an intimate attachment and only good health can ensure the well being of the mind. No one has in hand the key to keep the mind in good frame. But there are ways and means to maintain good health and so the body ought to be taken good care of at least for the mind's contentment.

These are not my words; they are my teacher, Ambuj Bhattacharya's. My physique has been attractive even before I was into calisthenics or general physical exercises. I myself had this notion as well. It would not be an offence of self-adoration on my part perhaps if I say that physical exercises added subsequently to the embellishment of my physique with the passing years. Many are aware of my heydays as a pugilist. Later on, I learnt karate and passed on the art to scores of enthusiasts. I taught karate to a few of the present well-off surrendered militants prior to their disappearance in the jungles years before. Two slain revolutionaries were also students of my karate-club. Though I enjoyed my stint as an instructor of this form of martial art, the pre-occupation did not ensure enough scope for establishment in the future. So the search for a suitable job began. I faced the interviews for four jobs without success—not for my incompetence; government jobs are actually on sale owing to the corrupt system followed by the authorities concerned. Even the fourth grade ones. Some jobs are bargained at the level of several lakhs of rupees. I had only heard about these things earlier. They proved to be true only during the time I was crippling with exhaustion from pillar to post on the lookout for employment. The outcome is nothing short of agony. My thoughts and feelings grew rebellious against society. At times I brooded—Should I too join the ULFA as my childhood mates, Rajendra, Hariprasad and Maqbool? I had almost arrived at the final decision to step ahead when the call for interview for the post of Deputy Superintendent of Police reached me, "Well," I thought, "Let me face the last interview of my life!" And what an amazing change of fate it had brought about! My trump card went my way. Probably good sense prevailed over the members of the interview board who must have thought that it would be sheer injustice to deprive me of the post.

May be the consideration was not based on my academic qualification with 56 per cent marks in Education as my major subject—it was for some other reason. Surely, it was the impact of my personality with prominent masculine features tagged with my accomplishment in boxing and karate. After taking charge of such a wish-fulfilling assignment, however, it was my turn now again to sink into frustration. The salary was quite adequate, no doubt, but for someone like me who had not been able to abandon a pint of honesty and integrity, job satisfaction was painfully amiss. If I were to begin my life with the prevalent ruthlessness and malpractices, I would end up being the worst of wretches! Can money and affluence ensure me peace?

Let me reveal something. If it goes on to incur the wrath of anyone, so be it. The crux within the shell is that the criminal world is protected by the police force itself. Had they been genuine policemen, people in Assam could have gone out leaving their houses unlocked as in Gujarat; there would not have been any place for miscreants in politics; the vandalism of anti-social elements would have come to an end; the open oppression of rowdy contractors, land mafia, fish mafia and others would not have appeared on the scene.

These topics are unending. Once you open your mouth, they keep on pouring out in a chain-like manner. Eh, come one, leave them alone. The actual matter is—as I was different from the rest, it caused them a lot of problems. When I submitted the actual post-mortem report of a person who happened to be the victim of a pre-planned murder, my superiors were disgruntled. They began to exert tremendous pressure upon me to have their ends fulfilled. I was asked in threatening tones to alter my report. As I could not snuff out my conscience, I resigned from my job. Many of my colleagues and friends are said

to have voiced their disenchantment thus—should such naïve nincompoops exist in today's world? Has he gone honkers or something!

I was back again to my joblessness. However, fortune suddenly turned propitious. A writer friend of mine helped me occupy a cubicle at the office of a reputed daily. The newshounds there had not succumbed to yellow journalism or black-mailing. The house had a name and was affluent too. My salary allowed me to have quite a modest lifestyle though I was a simple proof-reader.

No, this is not the end of my introduction. I am single at present but this does not imply that I have vowed to remain a celibate forever. I am just about to step into my thirties (twenty-nine years two months, precisely). Our family is among the old residents of Guwahati. So instead of a rented house I enjoy my space within the four rooms of my parental homestead. I have my mother, a younger sister and a brother. We rent out a cottage too. After my father's demise, my mother has been receiving a monthly family pension.

Thus ends my complete introduction. As they say in film language—a character has been established.

Then from hereon I begin my story,

Amidst the routine humdrum and listlessness, numbness and monotony, my entire being has been impaled.

My mother and sister arrange my breakfast at nine in the morning. While I have my breakfast alone, mother seizes the opportunity to draw my concern over certain practical matters, like the electricity bill for the month has been abnormally high; my sister, Sunita's age cannot wait till a suitable groom arrives and so I need to hasten up with my search; two tin-sheets on the roof are worn out with rust and should be replaced with new ones; how long would an epileptic patient like her would continue

to look after the household etc. Everyday mother projects newer and newer problems. Goodness, is this running of a household so trying? Those in charge of the country's administration seem to manage things some way or the other, after all. Hence, my mother's prattles enter through one ear and hurtle out of the other. Her problem-related concerns are becoming time-worn as the rasping melodies of old gramophone discs.

Next comes my office. The same drudgery of correcting careless lapses—crossing the t's and dotting the i's apart from setting the spellings right as 'salon' for 'saloon,' 'memento' for 'momento,' 'pivot' for 'pilot' etc. The DTPs add to our woes in the most perplexing manner. Sometimes a little error makes the entire sentence incomprehensible.

At the particular hour a cup of tea settles on my desk along with a piece of cake. I swallow them with the same disinclination. The proof matters that I go through are certainly not the run-of-the-mill stuff at all times, but my priority and focus on the correction of DTP spellings deprive me of any special sensation of pleasure that I could have derived from the contents. Perhaps this is the reason why the lives of proof-readers like me are insipid and monotonous both physically and mentally. Physically because the concentration on possible errors causes strain and the backbone in the sitting posture, too, seldom finds relaxation.

For relief from this unwholesome routine life of a commonplace and irritating existence, I have found out a way so as to maintain equilibrium of my body and mind. It is easy to disclose my finding but its practical application would require the capability to spend a little. My monthly income, fortunately, enables me to go ahead. What one would need to do is choose a day occasionally for himself and use it to his heart's content. The discovery had not been originally my own but of two celebrated writers,

Dale Carnegie and Deepak Chopra who have written "How to stop worrying and start living" and "Grow younger, live younger" respectively.

I have been on cloud nine spending three days as best as I wanted during the past couple of months. Today I am not needed to be in the office. I am having the day off. I intend to use the hours as another of my much-awaited days.

I am generally an early riser. To pass the day in an unusual way I watched an old Hindi movie of the yesteryears till the late hours last night on the TV to upset my normal morning schedule today. I enjoyed the film thoroughly with the evergreen songs that touched the innermost recesses of my mind. Those lilting melodies were completely contrary to the crude numbers churned out by Bollywood today. The heroines had a pleasant heart-touching personality with their decent attires and make-up. What a difference they made from those of today with the skimpiest of outfits radiating nothing but lust! I enjoyed my time last night pondering over the sea-change within a mere period of three decades.

Thus, I got to luxuriate over a wonderful morn today sunk in slumber and perceived the uniqueness of lethargy. Yes, words are incapable of expressing how unique lethargy could be, I myself prepared a cup of tea as informed to my mother and sister earlier. With tea I did not have those devitalized biscuits but three pieces of home-made pancakes.

One gets habituated with the discharge of excreta at a particular time of the day following the timely action of the peristaltic waves generated by the contraction and relaxation of the muscles of the intestines. Today I missed this hour of mine. Nevertheless, two glasses of lukewarm salt-sprinkled water restored my urge to clear my bowels and remove the impediment for relief and an ablation-like

sensation. Normal excretion has a relation with delight. Hence, I too derived today my share of delight as on other days. Today I had been in no mind to munch the usual dry *chapattis* with the same hotchpotch of potato and lentil. I had asked my sister for a special arrangement with four *idlis* supplemented by coconut chutney and sambar full of chopped vegetables, two *dahi vadas* dipped in curd and a steaming mug of aromatic coffee. I was immensely gratified with a pure South-Indian breakfast.

Generally, when I have a day off, I stuff my tummy at lunchtime with a belching load of rice and local chicken and snore away to glory till three in the afternoon. Today the schedule has undergone a change. All of us in the family came out for a treat at the food planet, "Majulir Exaj" by the Radhagovinda Baruah Road. The food here revived old endearing memories of our village home, or as they say, today, enmeshed us in nostalgia. Here we had grilled *goroi* fish and fermented rice with fried dry chillies, then fried bittergourd chopped into tiny strips, papaya prepared in alkali, tatted pulse with rice, chicken curry, large pieces of flat fish prepared with potato and potherbs etc. Of course, different varieties of chutneys as grinded mint leaves, *Kahudi-Kharoli* were there. The sumptuous meal ended with betel nut and leaves, treacly tobacco.

As on other days I did not go for a siesta. I asked mother and sister to return home while I jumped onto a city-bus and alighted at Adabari. A strange thought came to my mind. I decided that I would board any bus that stopped near the point where I was standing and head for any place the bus was bound for. I got into a bus and also found a little space for a seat. The bus-conductor, collecting the fares, asked me—Where to? I felt an urge to tell him—To the distant horizon where the sandy stretches of hope, the honey-combs of desire remain glittering! How poetic! Had I voiced my feelings, he would have

taken me to be someone off his head. The passengers, too, would have giggled. I returned from my world of fantasy and told him—wherever the bus comes to a final halt! and advanced three ten-rupee notes towards him. The conductor perhaps had come across the most unusual moment of his service-life. All signs of unease disappeared from the wry face of the twenty-year-old lad. A sweet lively smile gleamed on his under-nourished face. He suddenly seemed to have gained a lot of beauty and radiance. With a restrained chuckle he said—you have a wonderful way of expressing things in a twisted form. He handed me two rupees back.

The bus advanced amidst the babbling of passengers and through the neighing gusts of swiftly-passing vehicles. We crossed the Saraighat bridge and headed not towards Baihata but in the direction of Hajo. I had to consider the situation awhile. It had not turned into any daring adventure. The bus would surely reach Nalbari via Hajo. My conjecture proved true after my co-passenger nodded to imply "Yes, you are right." Alas, another usual course of events again! What would I do at Nalbari at my Pehi's place? What reason would I mention before her for my coming? I can perhaps fabricate the actual situation but it would not make any difference. Pehi would begin to brag about her children with irritating adjectives in between and at times, open tip her hollow episodes. Everyone in the household would treat me with the same warmth and affinity. The presence of a guest would claim the lives of a number of pigeons. Yogurt at the end of every meal. With yogurt liquefied molasses!... Everything as usual, repetition of the same traditional practices.

I alighted from the bus before reaching Hajo. The passengers and the conductor stared at my face in utter surprise. They might have been wondering—How crazy this guy is! All of a sudden what had made him get down?

There was not a soul around for miles! When I alighted from the bus I found that the place was a wide verdant expanse of uninhabited wasteland where time seemed to come to a standstill, the voice of the heart slumped to silence, the flora and fauna mingled in intimacy. What splendour! For someone like me, surviving somehow amidst the crowded clamour of Guwahati, this was nothing short of a bliss. I tried to lose my consciousness and merge with the surroundings. My eyes quenched their thirst upon the rare treat of nature. Lush green fields, the dense green woods afar, the Brahmaputra in its sun-drenched glory, the ambrosial chorus of birds and insects on the branches of trees and the infinite expanse of the azure sky beyond everything!

All of a sudden an automated sound went on to deepen the silence and solitariness of the depth of noon. I regained my composure. It was the pounding sound of a waiting auto-rickshaw and the driver, craned out his neck to ask—Going? The right question at the right hour. Yes, somewhere I must surely go. I questioned—Anything worth seeing in this direction? The auto-driver answered—Is that something to be asked? Everyone knows about it, I said—I do not. Tell me. He uttered—Bonmou, adjacent to the Brahmaputra. It is a fantastic tourist spot. He got my answer when I got into the auto-cab without saying anything.

We arrived at Bonmou after 22 minutes. I kept the auto waiting. The auto-driver surely deserved to be thanked. I benefited a lot from this man driving an empty auto back to Guwahati. A wonderful tourist spot, really. A cute watercourse steamed forth across a wide expanse, a woodland embellished by nature, rows of *Dendru* trees and coconut palms, a fishery, vermillion paths in between, the enormous Brahmaputra to the north, wonderful reclining arrangements on the banks for tourists, dining

halls and huts, etc. It was quite silly on my part to remain ignorant about such a lovely spot near Guwahati. I had the sensation as if I were a sparkling wave of the Brahmaputra, a beatific multi-hued bird of the woods, I now beheld a wish-inspiring stream of consciousness in the zigzags of the watery course.

The cool breeze from the Brahmaputra, the silvery water-line merging with the distant horizon, the lush greenery behind with the primeval voice of the woods. I settled upon a rounded seat and pondered—How wonderful it would have been if I could lose myself as an engrossed sage in the depths of tranquillity!... Hunger in an empty belly! I wanted to eat something. Sunset was closing in. There was a wide spacious room for a restaurant surrounded by teaks and coconut palms. There, too, was the same assortment of edibles—cold drinks like Coca Cola and Thumps Up, perhaps they had hard drinks too, varieties of fast food, chicken *masala*, tandoori chicken, fishfinger, *Jeera* rice, *biryani* and the like. This is the usual menu for any restaurant. Hence, the waiter had reason to be taken aback when I ordered green-coconut water, the fleshy part of the shell, tomato soup, slices of bread with sprouting *mung* pulse. The restaurant, interestingly was able to serve me all the items except the last. I ate to my heart's content and slumped upon a grassy carpet in solitariness a little distance away. I sat with thighs crossed in a yogasana posture. My lifeblood, the silvery Brahmaputra was right in front of my eyes. Behind me was the glory of greenery and the quietude of the depth of night, a mute but unique liveliness.

I seemed to be out of my self to be a different person altogether. I had come face-to-face with life, the realities of life. As if I were in quest of the ultimate truth. My soul seemed to have attained an elevation. Amazing! Then this silent resonance can keep man above the diurnal insignificance

and transport him to an indescribable elysium. I rejoiced fancying that the sages of the *Upanishadas* had bestowed the earth with the light of wisdom that they derived from meditation in such kinds of ambience. Strange! How could I muse over these loads of thought—and that too as an ordinary mortal! Have I grown creative as some distinguished novelist? The hours had flitted past in no time. I had lost sense of it completely. Yes, it is time that is the flowing stream of transitoriness and transformation.

But what is this happening? I felt an ache in my eardrums. A number of vehicles had packed up the place. The clamour of people and noises blended to create a sort of sound-pollution. Bonmou was crowded by visitors and tourists. Varied types of people with varied dresses, men and women with different mind-sets, their children and maids. A number of expensive cars were parked a few metres away. Honda Citys, Opel Astras, Mitsubishi Lancers, Toyota Corollas and the like. I caught sight of a Mercedes Benz too. The gait and mannerism of many bore an apparent show of affluence and aristocracy. All of a sudden I was overpowered by a surge of frustration. What a transformation had descended upon the paradise-like Bonmou so abruptly! It was a recurrence of an usual ambience of any tourist resort. I lost all charm to remain there a moment longer. The euphoria drained out from me completely.

The auto-cab that I had hired was waiting for me, in sharp contrast to its features, beside a sparkling Verna. I took my seat behind the driver and gestured him to accelerate.

I was at my much-unsought Guwahati after about an hour. The city-lights were glowing as stars on a dark night. The mechanical lights of automobiles had turned the roads into rivers with the fluidity of their illumination. The glow-signs of hotels, restaurants, department stores

and other establishments had lent a bit of elegance to the otherwise unpleasant face of Guwahati during daytime.

I was now an nonexistent being, merely a number shorn of any identity in the most impersonal commonplace state, a minute speck among countless many. Ah, how agonizing! It was impossible to advance along the pavement. The rush of pedestrians, the stench of sweat and cosmetics blending together, meaningless commotion and activities!

This was really an anti-climax. As if I were banished from the blissful Mediterranean climes to the barren wastes of a desert. My restlessness, frustration and agony mounted. Not because of the end of a day that I had according to my wish, but because of my inability to find out some way to get myself engaged with a different form of assignment.

I entered a garment store intending to buy a 'Reebok' T-shirt with floral designs as in some sarees. The salesman showed me a number of T-shirts one by one. I kept shaking my head to show my disapproval. This continued as I struggled with my choice over 15 or more shirts. I shifted my gaze to the salesman. It astonished me to find that he was still not exasperated with me. His professional smile remained stuck to his face. That is it, boy. This is salesmanship! He belonged to the Marwari community. Our Assamese salesmen should learn from him. Some Assamese shopkeepers appear to be rather annoyed by the arrival of customers! As if they were not tradesmen but custodians of valuables.

It is said that thoughts arrive unknowingly and abruptly. That is how certain tunes ring in a musician's ear, certain stories reach a writer's mind, certain emotions burst forth in a poet. Accordingly, a thought came to my mind: Had I been at home now, I would have been watching TV with gratifying sips over my occasional cups of tea. Of course, everyone has the same pastime at this hour. But today I must do something different, something new. Instead of

this routine tea why not spend some time at a bar and be on cloud nine irrigating my gullet with a few pegs of whisky? For many, two pegs after sundown is a usual activity. But it was only for a young health-enthusiast like me, brought up in a middleclass-sanctified ambience, that this ritual is unusual. However, I was not one to be shackled all along in a confined world of restraint, I mean, earlier, I had not held myself from occasional sips of booze.

I reached the ever-busy bustling Ganeshguri, the commercial zone adjacent to the capital complex of Dispur. The place has a number of bars apart from the ones inside the multi-storeyed hotels. Moreover, wine-shops could be found almost at every step. The situation could make any visitor or tourist to the city ponder—Ganeshguri, or rather the whole of Guwahati, perhaps remains sunk in alcohol. The conjecture surely would not entirely be superficial as evident from the number of road-mishaps in the city regularly as a result of driving in states of drunken stupor.

This liquor business has transformed the lives of many a no-hoper into those of princes. I can cite scores of instances. For example, my associates Akshay Saikia, Jadumoni Das, Aniruddha Purkayastha, Adhar Tamuly and others. Each of them owns a bar or a wine shop. The license to run such establishments requires the favour of the Excise Ministry. No wonder, the acquirement of this favour is quite pricey. Who does not know about the affluence and influence of my old class-mate, Akshay Saikia? This son of a powerful bureaucrat was least interested in studies. He just somehow managed to get through the Higher Secondary exams. Though he tried to pursue his studies in college later, he could not become a graduate. Finding no better alternative, his dad opened a PCO booth for him. When the venture flopped, his dad helped him with a travel agency. This, too, made no headway. However, he managed to get the government's nod to open a bar. He did not have to look back from then onwards. He ran an

unauthorized discotheque along with a casino. He began to flourish, making money hand over fist. He became the owner of two pubs and two wine shops in no time. His movement and gait acquired a new-found suavity and solemnity, he moved about in sleek automobiles while his urges found fulfilment only in the dark alleys. His inner being (character !) was on a downslide. Despite the man he had become, my relationship with him remained the same as before. Occasionally, he invited me to his place—perhaps to exhibit his accomplishment and glory !

With all these thoughts circumnavigating my mind I reached Akshay Saikia's bar 'Moonlight' only to find that the place, which could have gratified my urge to moisten my throat with a few swigs, had already downed its shutters. Next to it was a shop dealing in watches, electronic appliances and spare parts. A boy was fully concentrating on the repair of a mobile phone. My interruption had surely annoyed him. As a yogi whose composure has had an abrupt disruption, he raised his eyes with resentment and questioned, "Need anything?" I answered—"No, I just wanted to ask—why is this bar, I mean the Moonlight bar closed tonight?" The boy's exasperation had not subsided. He said in a disgruntled tone—"Aren't you from Guwahati? Do not you watch your TV?"

"I did not understand the matter."

"Oh, I see. You must have been busy elsewhere. The court has ordered the closure of all bars and wine-shops in the vicinity of educational and religious establishments. Anyway Dada, now have a look at this mobile set by Nokia—you do not need to press anywhere, just a touch on the screen will do...."

I took the cellphone in my hands and examined the functions and new mode of operation. At least to give the boy a little bit of satisfaction. And one more thing, though Akshay Saikia prospered in his business along the wrong track, our past intimacy did not allow our relationship to

split altogether. Hence, my heart was sympathetic, too, for my old chum who had been thrust into an unpleasant situation by the court's verdict. An illegal sympathy, perhaps, this was!

I reproached myself. I was surprised at my slip of memory about the court's order on the closure of bars and liquor outlets lately that has been hot news for everyone. May be my disinterest for the topic was the cause of this forgetfulness. The unusual inclination today to wet my lips and throat with alcohol collided with this reminder of an information and created a sort of reaction in my mind.

I reached Akshay's place. He was as much stupefied as elated to see me. He took me in his arms. I admitted before him—I should have come earlier. The court-order must have caused you a great deal of loss!

I looked at his face as I finished my words. There was not the faintest sign of any depression, disappointment or dejection on the face of the man who had lost hold of two pubs and two wine-shops. He was his former self speaking in his characteristic loud tone teeming with enthusiasm. Have you not suffered any loss?

“Yes and no, too.”

“What do you mean?”

The profit remains the same. An arrangement is always there, and why won't there be an alternative? Some people and even our judges are completely mistaken that people would turn teetotallers overnight with each of them becoming a Morarji Desai!

I grew curious to learn about the alternative means by which Akshay was making his earnings with such unperturbed ease. After having tea and snacks at his place I accompanied him in his car to have a look at his business activities. I could not make out anything about the location where he was taking me to. I always find myself at a total loss of direction at Guwahati during night time.

The region that we entered appeared quite suburban to me. Akshay went on speaking—There are people who arrive to carry the bottles from any spot you mention: small retailers, tobacconists, tea-sellers and the like. However, customers are facing various forms of inconveniences. Prices have doubled. The situation is the same at Manipur and Mizoram. Do you understand...

At last we reached an attractive farmhouse. From outside the ambience seemed to be quiet and solitary. But a mild hum pervaded inside. A number of sleek automobiles were parked by the sides of the house.

Cute chairs and tables. Whisky glasses atop the tables. Dignified people of different ages had their lips on their glasses. In the midst there were ladies too.

I was stunned. This illegal set-up was more gorgeous than the authorized bars. Akshay said—I have two more similar establishments. Do you see how wonderfully they run? Just as a father has a father, a master too has a master over him. A government, too, has another duplicate government over it. You surely are not unaware whose government it is!

Why would I not develop simultaneous feelings of wrath, grudge and hostility against this man? After all, I am no Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave or Jayprakash Narayan! How strange! A few girls were busy filling the empty glasses with their characteristic charm. They might not exactly fit into the category of beauties, but they could not be dismissed, too, as being shorn of attraction altogether.

A particular sight almost drew out sparks of fire from my eyes. There was DSP Khargeswar Deka a little distance away boozing and that too without bothering to have his official uniform taken off His partners perhaps were his subservient aides. I completely lost my patience. These protector-turned-leeches are the main cause of the nation's disaster! I had been a karate instructor. The reaction of a

gun-wielder too could in no way match the lightning pace of my bare hands.

I did not allow Khargeswar any opportunity to counter even my verbal assault on him, I landed solid punches on his face to my heart's content. I filled every portion of his body with different varieties of karate kicks that I had in my repertoire. His sagging legs could not hold the weight of his frame any longer on the surface. Blood drained out of his nose as he tumbled down with a disfigured face. His associates, too, were overwhelmed by my 'blitzkrieg' and made no attempt to come near me. I had a slanting glance at everyone and eyeing Akshay with extreme detestation, strutted out of the place fearlessly.

I stepped into an auto-rickshaw after mentioning about my destination. Amidst the rattling of the engine I quietly went on musing—Really what a day off! I have had the best of everything with which I sought to advance along the moments of the day. Tomorrow Khargeswar, with his broken face, would not be able to tell anyone that an ordinary citizen like me had given him this thrashing.... By the way, have I made my hands stink by killing a muskrat? No, not at all. It has been a symbolic manifestation of my resentment and loss of trust over this social order that is totally devoid of a conscience....

*Translated by Krishna Dulal Barua from the Assamese original,  
"Agatanugatik", Gariyosi, 2012*



## ARJUN

Mahasweta Devi

The month of *Agrahayana* is coming almost to an end. Pous will follow. The weather is not very cold. Yesterday, crops were cut in the paddy fields of Bisal Mahata. Ketu Shabar went with the other grain-collectors to collect grains. In the evening, Ketu was thinking how to get a little bit of *chullu*, the country liquor. He knows well that he will not get it. Yet he relishes the thought of getting it!

His wife is Mahani. When the husband is in jail, she goes to Manbazar to work in others' farmyards. Reaping crops, digging soil, collecting woods from the jungle are her daily activities. Ketu very often remains in jail. The culprits like Ram Haldar force them to cut trees from the jungle in secret, and unfortunately the poor, illiterate and helpless men like Ketu are taken to the jail. What can ketu do! How many times he tried to make them understand, saying "Babu, we get only four rupees at the end of the day. If you ask us to cut the trees, we will cut them. If you ask us to cut men, we will cut them off too."

Nobody gives him this megre four rupees to test whether he would really cut men or not. Nobody even takes his words literally.

When Ketu is taken to the jail on the charges of cutting the government forest, Ram Halder searches for the other Ketus.

Ketu has now stopped to think anymore. As they are born in the Shabar houses of Purulia, they are bound to cut the trees and go to jail. This has become almost a rule here.

And when Ketu is imprisoned, Mahani goes out to find work. In the realm of this rule, frosts ooze and fill the lonely cottage. The body wants more wine. A little intoxication. Only to forget a little.

At this moment, Bisal Mahata comes and stands before him all of a sudden. And says in an endearing voice, "Oh Ketu! Let me have a word with you."

"Is it something about vote Babu?"

"No, no. In that case I know very well that you will cast your vote to whomsoever I ask you to. Isn't that so?"

"Yes babu."

"What was Ram Halder telling you?"

"He said the same thing that you tell me now"

"Then what did you tell him?"

"I also told him the same thing that I tell you now"

"What does that mean?"

"Pardon me babu. We the foolish people can not speak well. I beg your pardon."

"However, let me stop talking about vote now I have something more important to talk to you. Come and listen."

Ram Halder and Bisal Mahata may be the people under two different political banners, but in the eyes of Ketu, both are the same. Ketu always pretends to be foolish before them. He also replies to them in the same foolish

manner. He needs both of them. Without satisfying both these gods, it is difficult to survive in this area.

They too know well that in order to accomplish their works, they need these Shabar people. These Shabars have records of spending long times in jail. How can they say 'no' to the words of these political leaders!

Ketu becomes curious. Vote is imminent. Bisalbabu is attending meetings everywhere, making thousands of promises, and asking for votes. Yet, he says that he has nothing to do with votes! Then what will he talk about! Is it something about some wicked things!

"What do you have to say to me babu?"

"You have to cut the Arjun tree in the crossing of the three roads."

"Babu, is it so?"

"Yes."

"But I have just returned from the jail babu."

"If I want to send you to jail again, will you be able to resist that?"

"No, babu."

"Then why do you fear? Do you think that you are going to cut trees for Ram Halder so that you have to go to jail? You will cut the tree under my order. Who will take you to the jail?"

Fog seems to cloud Ketu's head. This is true! He never thought it earlier. When they cut the trees at Ram Halder's order, they are to go to jail. Perhaps Bisalbabu is now all in all. His party too is ruling now! And that is why if he is to cut the old shadowy government tree now, there is no risk of going to jail.

Suddenly, a ray of hope comes to his mind.

"Babu as the vote is coming, will the road be metalled? And is it for that the tree needs to be cut?"

"Metalled road? Here? O Ketu! It has not been done in 30 years. And it never will be done."

Chilly sky. Chilly air. And from the distant cassette shop, the opera 'Santoshi Ma' can be heard. Now everything, it seems, forces Bishal to speak out the truth.

"No, no. Not for metalled road! I myself need the tree."

"You need such a huge, big tree!"

"Yes I need that big tree."

"How will you carry away that?"

"Rambabu's truck will carry that."

Now the evening gradually comes and takes shelter in the lap of night. Strange evening indeed. The smell of ripe corn floats in the air of Bandihi. Bishalbabu's words struck almost as a heavy blow on the heart of the starved, destitute and recently jail-returned Ketu. He is helpless. Almost like Chandra Santhal. In the collision during harvest time, they pressed a huge 20 kg weight on Chandra's body.

Now this was a huge pressure on Ketu. Bisal Mahata and Ram Halder are the people of two different political banners. One is in Panchayat, and the other has a saw mill in the outskirts of the district. When they deliver their speech in public, one accuses the other. But when Ketu and others cut trees under the compulsion of Bisalbabu, then Rambabu secretly carries them by his truck.

Ketu is oppressed by the thought of the tree. Alas! They cannot save the tree! This tree is the last symbol of the Bandihi jungle of the earlier Zamindari rule. When Ketu looks at the tree, so many things of the past crowd his memory.

The memories of those days when the forest was dense, and these Shabars were solely dependent on it. When they happened to see the unknown people from the outside world, they used to hide in the jungle almost like scared rabbits or deer, hare or *kheria*. Is it for that they are known as *kheria shabar*?

The old people of the village have absolute faith in the tree. They worship the tree like a god. And Ketu would not be able to save that tree now! He says, "Yes babu, I will cut the tree." He stretches his hand and asks for ten rupees. Mysterious evening! Ketu says in a surprised tone, "Babu, only ten rupees!"

"Drink wine. I will give you more. You alone would not be able to cut the tree. Gather others. I will give you wine; I will give you money."

Rambabu is not only in the business of cutting and selling trees, he also takes a lead role in the campaigns of the government "save the tree, save the forest," and also takes part in the tender of selling government forest. Taking these opportunities, he himself secretly removes the trees. And those hands which hold the axes, some of them are rewarded only with a torchlight or a radio or a clock or a cassette player or in some cases even a cycle. And of course country wine! He gives them these things realizing their usefulness. Whether they make any offence or not, every now and then they are taken into custody by these jungle babus and the police babus. And nobody gives them money as Bishalbabu does. Then is he not good enough for Ketu?

"Now I will go to the town. I have to arrange the meetings. *Sala*, there is not a single wall in the village to write about the election. I will bring the leaflets and banners."

"Give me a little banner babu."

"You do not have any wall. What will you do with it?"

"Babu I want to lay it out on the muddy ground of my hut. We cannot sleep well in the cold."

"I will give you Ketu, I will give you. Just cut the tree as early as possible. As soon as I get back, I will dispatch it."

"That Arjun tree!"

"Yes, Ketu! By hook or crook, I want the tree."

The foggy dark evening almost devours the monkey cap and sweater decked Bishal. Being worried, Ketu goes to Banamali, Diga and Pitambar. As he takes wine, he gets a warm welcome from them. Everybody has returned from jail. One who holds an axe must go to jail. This is the rule here. And the people like Ram Halder will build their big houses in the towns of Bankura and Purulia. There is no way to get out from the shackles of law. Who will dare to challenge them? Among these people, Diga is respected a little more. Because once he attended the Informal Education classes for four days arranged by the government. Diga's pregnant wife brings puffed rice and chillies for them. Diga says, "We need to think about the matter."

The four Shabars are overpowered by the heavy influence of *chullu*, the country liquor. They think more and more. During marriages and festivals, we go to the tree and beat our drums of *dhol* and *dhamsas*. There we bury our hair from shaved heads in the name of God. The tree has medicinal value too. Diga's father knew it well. Pitamber says in a faint voice, "The Santhals come here to perform cow dances during *bandhna* festival also."

Whether they cut the tree or not, they have to go to jail. The Bandihi village is rich with the lands and trees of the forest department. But these *Kheria* and *Shabars* have no rights here. Diga thinks some more and says, "Then why should we alone suffer and die? Let us tell the others. They will surely send us to jail on false charge. But as for the Arjun tree, we have much faith in it. Isn't it?"

The Arjun tree stands on the way of the three roads crossing for so many years now. Almost from the beginning. Generally, nobody cares much. But now it seems that something is churning in their hearts. The fields under the forest department were once crowded with trees. The

lands are still uncultivated. But wherever these Shabars, the sons of the forest go to set up their huts, they are driven out. The trees are cut and dispatched by those greedy people. These Shabars are also divided into groups. But when this Arjun tree was young, everybody used to go to pay their offerings before going for hunting. Now see, how gorgeous it looks in its old age! With a cream white look it raises its head towards the sky. In the lustrous full moon night, both the tree and the moon merge into one. In the suffocating summer of *Chaitra* and *Baisakh*, its shadow offers peaceful shelter. And that tree of the three roads crossing is now going to be cut!

Pitambar says, "For so many years the tree has been protecting us like a guard! Now the forest means, only this Arjun tree. And the children of the forest means only us now, a few households! And they need the tree!"

Ketu says in grief, "Now everything is for these Bisalbabu and Rambabu."

Pitambar says, "When I could not build my hut, I took shelter under this tree for so many days... And then the Mahata people gave me land to build my hut..."

Diga says, "When Rambabu burnt the houses of the Santhals, did they not come and take shelter under this tree?"

Thus so many memories now crowd the minds of these people. Alas! The poor helpless people, whom the government and the society evict again and again from the society, use them, send them to jail, at once come to realize that their condition is also like the helpless Arjun tree.

Diga says, "Bishalbabu is now going to the town. Then let me ask him for money?"

"Are you ready to cut the tree?"

"Just we five people are enough. Ask him to give only one hundred rupees."

“Then we have to go again to jail.”

Diga smiles a clever and tricky smile. When people are taken to the jail again and again, and are used even by the people of other classes, such people like the Shabars are bound to live in camouflage. They have one face for people like Bishalbabu, and the other remains hidden. Diga chews the chilly and says, “In Purulia, burning the police station during the British regime, and now capturing others' lands by force, killing others, cutting the government forest, for all these Shabars are the only hand tools of these babus. Who will be taken to jail so easily? Do not worry. Leave the matter to me.”

The jail-returned Diga Shabar who has already spent years in the jails of Jamshedpur, Chaibasa, Medinipur and Bankura, and who know the Bengali alphabet, only through them assures Bishalbabu almost like a mother. He says, “Do not worry. Go and attend the meetings for vote. Just give me the money. Come day after tomorrow, and see. The tree will have surely vanished.”

“Will Rambabu come to know anything?”

“Let us see. Besides we know well that he will lend you the truck.”

“Will the outside people come to know?”

“Let us see.”

The people of the different political banners quarrel only in public. But in secret they work hand in hand. “Oh Bishalbabu, you have taught these foolish Shabars so many things! Even got such fruitful informal education too!”

Bisal Mahata goes away. The two village leaders go back with huge expectations. Now in public meetings, one will accuse the other. But the foolish cadres do not understand this. They will indulge in violent fightings and killings. These things happen very often, Violence may take place around this Arjun tree also. However, Rambabu has a few

servile followers in this village. He will not be able to do anything more. Because everywhere it is Bishalbabu.

On the way to the town, Bisalbabu has to attend meeting after meeting in markets and other places. Even when he is in town, he always remains busy. Repairing the home lights, buying new chandeliers, shawls for his wife, and medicines.

Bishalbabu now returns in Bandihi with great expectations. Alas! No road. Rivers like Nonsai, Tatko are to be crossed. And then he gets down from the bus. Now he walks towards the north-west following the rocky uneven path. So many promises are afloat before the elections, but as soon as it is over, everything vanishes in to the air!

And when Bishalbabu arrives near the village, his head almost reels to see that the Arjun tree is still there! Its head held up against the sky, it stands there like a village guard. There was a time when innumerable trees used to protect the land. Now the tree is alone. It is still carrying the memory of the lost comrades all alone. It is guarding the plundered land of this Manbhumi as per its own ability.

“The leaf of the Arjun tree is almost like the human tongue.”

And now there is a maddening crowd. People are beating drums of *dhamsas*, *dhols* and playing flutes. Bisalbabu enters into the village in deep anger. Many people have gathered around the tree. And the tree is being worshipped with garlands.

Ram Halder stands there with the cycle in his hand.

What is this?

People have made the tree as village god.

What? The bastards!

Diga Shabar saw in a dream that you have paid them money, and asked them to raise an alter with stones around the tree. Now the worship is going on. Santhals, Kherias,

Sahis, Bhumijas, all are there. The people of other castes are also there.

Village god!

Yes. People from all around are coming. It has been turned almost into a fair. We always thought them to be fools. But they have really defeated us now Isn't it tree?

Bisal Mahata goes a few steps forward to realize the depth of his defeat. It is a huge crowd! Ketu is frantically dancing with his *dhol*. And he is joined by the others. Somehow Bisal is frightened. He feels very weak. This tree! These people! Everything is known to him. But how do they seem so unfamiliar now? He is frightened. Terribly frightened.

*Translated by Arun Pramanik from the Bengali original "Arjun",  
Panchasti Golpa, 1996.*



## THE WOMAN AND THE SERPENT

*Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay*

**K**honra Sheikh was loosening bricks from the kiln. No one knows his real name, probably, he does not remember it either. He is known as Khonra, the lame man, since he fractured his left leg when he was a child. He is lame and his nose is horribly sunk in due to the dreadful disease he contacted when he was young and living in lechery. His nose is a horrible yawning hole. Smallpox has left its scars too. He is not only ugly, but fearful to look at.

He went on loosening bricks.

Adai, alias Wahed Sheikh, was driving his cart. Wringing the tails of the bullocks he started on an obscene song but had to stop suddenly. The bullocks had halted. Adai cursed, "I will teach you a lesson... you will see if I do not...."

Boiling with anger he raised the stick. The animals went on snorting. Adai did not beat them. He shouted, "Look Khonra, there is a snake." A young snake was swinging

slowly, hood spread, just before his cart. Adai jumped down and picked up a brick.

Khonra came running with his limp. "Adai, do not kill it," he shouted, "let me come."

Adai kept the brick poised in the air. "What a beauty!" he said. "See the mouth? Vermilion red! What a lovely 'S' on the head! But it is going way, do come soon."

In trying to escape Adai, the snake was gliding towards Khonra. "Throw me your stick Adai!" Khonra shouted. "Ah! it is entering the kiln. It is a redhooded cobra, a rare species. I could earn a lot if only I could catch it."

He was a snake-catcher. He played with snakes too. Big earthen pitchers with sealed mouths hung from the eaves of his cottage. He kept his snakes in them. He took them to distant fields and set them free when they grew old. Some died. Khonra did not work as a day labourer as long as he had his snakes to play with. He took the drum and the flute and went to peddle his show. He earned more this way but his quota of bhang and opium went up too. And he drank. He used to go out with a handwoven basket slung on his shoulder as soon as the snakes died. Then he would go to the doors of the well-to-do with his ugly face and ask, "Need a labourer?"

He smiled in flattery. His ugly, hideous face looked uglier. He was not an idler. Whenever he got a job he worked really hard. He begged when unemployed, the basket on his shoulder. Bought bhang and opium with the money he got. Drank country liquor with the remnant of the coins and started weeping, clutching at Zobeda Bibi's feet as soon as he got back home.

"Being married to me has been an unending misery for you Zobeda. I am killing you... I am starving you..."

Zobeda smiled. Patting her husband's head, she said, "Now... now... do not be crazy. Let me go please... let me borrow some rice."

His arms around her neck, Khonra broke into louder lamentation, "Not a piece of new cloth could I give you... Only old rags..."

The next day Khonra went to the kiln early in the morning, a stick in his hands, a covered basket under his arms. The east horizon was just reddening with the crimson glow. Birds in the trees broke into loud twittering from time to time. Conchs sounded and bells rang in the village. Mangal-sweet smell. She could not explain it.

Khonra came back after two days. Cursing the rain god freely he said, "Get me something to eat. I am so hungry." Zobeda gave him rice soaked in water. Washing his feet Khonra entered the room and asked, "What is this smell Zobeda?"

"I do not know. It has been smelling like this for the last few days." Khonra went about the room, sniffing, trying to locate the smell. The snake gave an angry hiss as soon as he went near the basket. Khonra snorted.

"What is wrong?"

"It's Bibi. She is a female, it is time the male snakes came. The smell is an invitation."

"Well, it is something only you two know." Zobeda was rather taken aback. "Do eat all the rice."

"I will have to set it free in the field. It is not safe to keep them shut now." He ended his words with a deep long sigh. Zobeda greatly relieved. Sighing contentedly, she said, "That is better, far better. I can not tolerate her at all. I do not know why she does not die. The other snakes do."

Khonra took Bibi out of her basket after finishing the rice. Softly he whispered words of love to her, pressing the mouth.

"Look out, her poison fangs are growing again, the venom too has not been taken out. Let it go. What are you keeping it for?"

"See how she has coiled around my hand", Khonra said. He sat morosely in the afternoon. He had set Bibi free in the jungle adjoining the house. "Why are you sitting like this?" Zobeda said. "Go, take some bhang."

"I am pining for Bibi."

"Go and die! Really the things you say..."

"No Zobeda, I am feeling so sad!"

Sitting beside her husband, her arms around his neck, Zobeda said, "Why, do you not like me any more?"

Kissing her lovingly Khonra said, "That I am alive is only due to you Zobeda, you are more to me than my life."

"See Bibi has come back, see in the drain!" Zobeda exclaimed.

Bibi was moving in the drain with hood spread. "Let me catch her", Khonra tried to get up.

"No", Zobeda clasped her husband tightly. "Go, get away, shoo", she threw a cow-dung cake at Bibi. Angrily the snake bit at the earth and glided away.

It was almost midnight. Zobeda shouted, "Wake up, oh, wake up. Something bit me."

Khonra got up and lighted the lamp. It was true. One drop of blood glistened on the toe of her left foot like a drop of water.

"Bibi... your Bibi has bitten me, look!"

The snake was going away circling around a pitcher. Khonra caught her and putting her in the basket said, "If my Zobeda does not live, I will kill you too, I tell you."

Zobeda did not live. Signs of approaching death appeared with the rising sun. Her hair, when pulled, came out in fistfuls. The snake-charmers gave up and left. Khonra alone sat at her head, his ugly grotesque face miserable with sorrow.

One of the snake-charmers said, "You too could have died Khonra, their anger is proverbial. Perhaps she came to bite you."

"No", Khonra told him, his eyes full of tears.

Khonra became a fakir, a mendicant. His home is a big ruin now. There was a straggling village road once, just beside his house. No one walks on it now. "Full of snakes", they say. They are highly poisonous snakes too, these red hooded cobras. One can see them playing early in the morning, their red hoods spread.

Khonra could not kill Bibi after all. He set her free. "It is not your fault", he said. "It is in all women. Zobeda too could not tolerate you."

*Translated from Bengali by Mahasweta Devi*



## MAGDALI

*Nandeswar Daimari*

“Can you speak Santhali?”  
“Yes, I can.”

“Perhaps you can not speak fluently.”

“No brother! Why should I not be able to speak it fluently? I am accustomed to speaking the language since my birth.”

“Then, why are they...”

“Yes, that is the moot point, brother!”

In fact, Irakdao was compelled to think that way after what he heard about the girl from the people who had questioned her before he took his chair in the ABSU office. Though he did not doubt her, her complaint or statement could not be accepted easily. Irakdao, in fact, could not believe the veracity of the story. There might have been some discrepancies in hearing; that was why, in order to be sure, he was asking the same question repeatedly.

Sometimes he thought: was the girl mad? Strikingly, Irakdao who was adept in fathoming the pros and cons

of any issue whenever someone opened his mouth, had to ask the same question again and again.

Just as an inexperienced physician, unable to diagnose a small abscess after feeling it with his two fingers that it might be an unknown disease, he too was unable to have any sense of her and remained mum. When the symptoms of cancer appear in a patient's body, normally the physician sends a sample of the tissue for biopsy. But this was not such a simple case. The case was not too serious either to be referred to a bigger hospital, to a more experienced physician.

Having been mum for sometime, Irakdao asked again, "Oh yes, what was your name you said?"

"Magdali. Magdali Tudu."

Magdali. One would definitely find some difficulty in understanding the name too, Irakdao said to himself. Irakdao tried to find out what language the word Magdali might have come from. What might be the meaning of the word, he wondered. Like an archaeologist who after excavating a site and discovering a name of some king under the layer of stones tries to find out which clan he may belong to, Irakdao too tried to find out the meaning of her name. Like someone trying a new approach after having failed in the old way. Irakdao asked her again, "Can you tell the meaning of the word 'Magdali' in Santhal language?"

"I do not know, 'dada'."

Although Irakdao got a bit annoyed by her negative answer, his rage subdued automatically by the young damsel's addressing him as 'dada'. He might not be so senior or experienced, yet he considered himself to be a great leader. It was not that his teenage had not passed by, it was already gone years ago. Others might not be aware of it, but he himself knew it very well.

Since the beginning of the Boro movement, Irakdao was associated with the ABSU. Positioned in different posts of the ABSU, he was also one who led the movement. It was because of this movement that he could not even marry so far. To tell the truth, he found no time for it. Being promoted from one post to the other, he was now the president of the area committee of the ABSU. All the cases right from boundary disputes to elopement of girls came to him. He did not need much time to give a ruling on these cases. Nowadays Irakdao considered them to be very minor. If sometimes he found any difficulty, he managed them with the help of his colleagues. There was no objection to his decisions. Nobody had any other way but to obey his rulings.

Sometimes when he faced communal cases, he found himself in some sort of a quandary. Then he invited the heads of the social organizations like the literary association. The cases were solved in that way. In fact, he acted like a leader. He never forgot the fact that the people were keen to take up all these responsibilities once BTC would come to reality. That was why, whenever they faced a serious situation, they ran directly to the ABSU office, and not to the police. Irakdao and his colleagues too tried as best as they could, not to give up the cases. The final judgements, however, came only from Irakdao's table. When they failed they referred the cases to the police station. If the winning parties sometimes offered some gratifications on their own, Irakdao and his friends even resorted to merrymaking with arrangements of small 'parties'. Thus they felt happy that they could settle cases.

But today after hearing her, he had to be in a quandary: should he take up the case or not? As he saw it, this case was quite peculiar. Never in his life had he come across such a case, had never even heard of one. He felt that the case might not be very big, but it was not too small either.

It might not be too complicated, but yet it smacked of racial entanglements.

Is there any person in this world today who does not know how to love his or her own community? The person lacking it cannot be called a human being.

Even animals wander in search of their own kith and kin. Magdali too was a human being. What would be her offence if she was born of a Santhal mother, wanted to introduce herself as a Santhal girl?

That was why, she wanted to go back to the Santhal society. Getting into the Santhal society, she reared the ambition to marry a Santhal youth. Wherever the water of river may flow, one day it will definitely merge with the ocean. Likewise, in case of human beings too, wherever they may live, one day they feel feverishly eager to go back to their own society. That had happened in the case of Magdali too, Irakdao thought.

Inadvertently, Irakdao's eyes hovered over Magdali, from her feet to hair, or in a word, over her entire body. He even had a surreptitious glance of the outline of her face.

Magdali wore a pair of Santhal 'Pausiparandi' (a kind of skirt and sheet Santhal women wear to cover their body). At one time he imagined how she would look if she were undressed and dressed in other kinds of clothes.

Yes, Magdali did look like a Santhal woman. She was not even dark. The colour of her body blood red, of Mongolian hues. Just like a Boro damsel. Her conversation in Boro was also fluent.

Now he tried within his mind to wrap her with *Dakhana* and *Phali* (dress worn by the Bodo women). Without knowing why, Magdali now seemed to be a pure Bodo girl to him. He asked spontaneously, "How many years have you spent in a Bodo village?"

"I have been staying in the Boro village ever since my parents died. I do not remember exactly how many years I stayed there. The village of my parents was contiguous to a Bodo village."

"What about the village now?"

"The village no longer exists. Following the communal riot with the Boros, both the Boro and Santhal village have been completely destroyed. They have been burnt to ashes. We were kids at that time. Being aware of the fact that I have been orphaned after my parents' killing, one Bodo lady took me to her house. And in that way I grew young."

"With what expectation did she take you in? What do you think about this?"

"I think she took me out of kindness. But that family was also very poor. That is why I had stayed with another family as a house-help. And I attained this age that way. Yes, I am living among the Boros even today!"

"Then keep living among the Bodos."

Finding no way out Irakdao uttered these words. As he was brooding over whether he made a mistake by offering this suggestion, Magdali said, "I have no objection to staying with the Bodos, 'dada!' But it would not be right to stay along until death. I too..."

"Yes, I get it. You will also have to marry. Later on, will you not find a Boro boy?"

"Boro boy! I have no objection to that too. But it would be better if I get a Santhal boy as I am a Santhal myself. On the other hand, to speak the truth, I could not find any Boro lad so far. That is why, I got into a Santhal relief camp surreptitiously. Keeping away the Boro *Dakhana*, I put on a Santhal dress. But..."

"What happened then?"

"What shall I tell you, brother? They did not consider me a Santhal. They had imbibed the doubts that I am a CID of the Boros. Even they did not want to write my name in the register of the relief camp. In the dance programme too held on the occasion of the Durga Puja yesterday, I was not allowed to participate, I was kept away. They say when a fair complexioned girl like me claims to be a Santhal, it does not look befitting. Thereafter, I came back crying from the relief camp."

Irakdao looked at her eyes. While she was talking, tears were flowing down her cheeks incessantly.

Irakdao looked around if there was anybody. No, nobody was around. Yet he did not have the guts to wipe off the tears from Magdali's eyes, quite a stranger as she was to him. Irkadao too was a young bachelor. Not only that, there were other reasons too.

Santhali would get deeply hurt. In fact, she would burst into tears...

Nonetheless, these words were uttered by him inadvertently, "Please be seated for a while. After a few moments my colleagues would arrive. We together shall discuss the matter.... Let us see what can be done for you."

*Translated by Joykanta Sarma from the  
Bodo original, "Magdali",*



## WHEN IS DIDI COMING?

*Ved Rahi*

“Ma, when is didi coming?”

Gopi’s mother stopped sweeping the floor at his question. Tears welled into her eyes. In a broken voice she replied: “Gopi, if you do miss your didi so much, why not you visit her?”

“Ma, how can I go alone? shouldn’t someone come with me to the town?” said Gopi, keeping his satchel on the table. “Ma, jijaji will not come here again?”

“Why not, Gopi? Do not be impatient. He will, when he gets leave!”

“Ma, why doesn’t jijaji join our school again? I do not like the teacher who has come in his place. He can not teach. And he looks as though he has got a perennial stomach ache.”

Mother laughed, “Gopi, one likes one’s own jijaji. Your didi has gone so far away. May be that is why you dislike your other teacher.”

Gopi took off his topi and put it on the big earthern-pot. He started thinking.

A year ago when Krishna came to the village as a teacher, Gopi was to appear for his second standard examination. It was a difficult paper and Gopi was full of resentment for the new teacher. However, he got through the test. Gradually, he began to develop a liking for the new teacher for he never punished his students. Everyday after coming from the school Gopi sat chewing dry rotis, sitting in his sister's lap. He would talk eagerly about his teacher as though he were enjoying a spicy mango chutney on the plain rotis.

One day while Lacchmi was feeding him kheer in her lap she asked Gopi, "Little one, is your teacher that man who wears trousers?"

"Yes, yes, our masterji is from town. So he does have the airs. Have you not noticed his hair style. It is as though a cow has licked her calf."

Lacchmi could not stop laughing. Sometimes later she said, "How do I know he is your teacher? I had gone to the well to get water. I saw him from a distance there. I had a feeling he was your teacher."

One day while Lacchmi was milking the cow (and directing a stray stream to Gopi's mouth) she suddenly said, "Your teacher is very interesting, Gopi. I see him near the well everyday."

By now Krishna had spent three months in the village. Once when Gopi and Lacchmi were bringing home their cow lost in the distant hills they met Krishna face to face. Gopi made a namaste. When Krishna replied with a smile Lacchmi also smiled, blushed and turned her face.

Krishna visited Gopi's house once or twice for God knows what. Every visit Lacchmi would turn coy and blush. Then one day mother asked her son, "Gopi, shall we marry your didi to your masterji." Gopi was very happy to hear this. He agreed promptly. "Definitely, ma, Masterji is a very good match."

Lacchmi was married to Krishna after two months, and soon they went on transfer to town. Krishna had been trying for the transfer. He had only two younger brothers, his parents having died earlier. He was always worried about his brothers who were staying with a distant relative in the town.

He was very happy he got the transfer orders. Thus, Lacchmi not only started a new life but she also came into a new world. But poor Gopi felt lonely in the village. With his didi's departure he felt he lost everything. He had always eaten his food sitting in his didi's lap. When Lacchmi fed him, even the dry maize roti felt like buttered paratha. But now he could not eat his rotis even with ghee and water.

Gopi and Lacchmi often used to go to the hills to search their straying cow. Now when he had to search the cow he could not find her anywhere. His mother ultimately had to go to search for the cow.

Gopi did not even feel like going to the school. "Who was he to play and laugh with after coming from school?" He sat far away when his mother milked the cow, wanting yet to taste those streams of milk straight into his mouth. His mother was always busy. She could do nothing to bring a smile on Gopi's face. How could she make Gopi to play with her. It was difficult for her to even become Lacchmi.

After sweeping the floor mother served food. As usual he could not eat even the first morsel. Mother saw this and began to weep. She tried to soothe him, "Gopi, it is good your jijaji has gone to the town. Here he used to be constantly worried about his brothers. This has been good also for Lacchmi's sake. What has this village to offer? Only destiny brought Krishna here. Lacchmi was very lucky to marry such an educated and a decent boy. There she must be staying in a pucca house. No. They would not be able to come here soon. Moreover, should not a girl remain in her husband's house?"



"So shall I go alone to see my didi? She may not come but I can go."

Mother was silent. Next day, Gopi was ready to go to the town.

Gopi got ready with a white boat-shaped topi, black khadi coat, kurta, high pajamas and shoes. He took a small tin box full of raw mangoes, which mother had given as a sign of good omen for his didi to make pickles. He was eager to go to his didi's town. His mother saw him off in the bus on the main road ten miles away. Alone in the bus Gopi was suddenly afraid, quaking like a nestling coming out into the world for the first time.

When the bus reached the town, Gopi picked up courage and went to his sister's house after making enquiries at several places. It took him one hour. His shoulders were aching with the load. And he was perspiring profusely.

He stood at the door afraid and anxious, lost in his thoughts. Then slowly he knocked on the door. Immediately a boy his own age looked out and was surprised to see Gopi there. Gopi asked in whispers- "Is didi in?" That boy ran in. A few minutes later, Lacchmi came out, took the tin box from his shoulders and hugged him affectionately. She was sitting on her knees. Gopi forgot everything in his didi's embrace. Lacchmi could not control her tears. It was as though an emotional dam had burst in her.

Ratan and Shyam stood staring at Gopi. They had seen him at their brother's wedding. But that was a village and they were guests. How could they hardly comment. Now seeing Gopi in his baggy clothes they looked at each other silently "Our bhabhi is so nice, but her brother?"

Lacchmi enquired about her mother and several other people of the village, even about those with whom she was angry and with whom she had stopped talking. Gopi told her everything but nothing about himself. Lacchmi also forgot to ask. They were together, so everything was fine.

After sometime when she saw Gopi sitting, she got up quickly and said, "Go, play with Ratan and Shyam. I will make tea for your jijaji. He will be back any moment." Gopi did not like this. He looked at her with surprise. And then he caught Ratan and Shyam staring at him. Ratan was his own age and Shyam was slightly younger. Gopi wanted to talk to them. Ratan asked him, "Can you play Ludo?" Gopi did not even know what Ludo was! He replied, "No, I do not". Ratan and Shyam were surprised that he did not know a simple game like Ludo.

"Then what do you play?" They asked.

"Gilli-Danda," Gopi said proudly. He played this game better than all others in the village.

"But bhabi does not allow us to play Gilli-Danda," Shyam said.

Didi does not allow them to play Gilli-Danda? That was news to him. The thought of didi stopping him from playing! Suddenly it occurred to him that his didi has changed. Seeing Gopi silent, Ratan and Shyam started playing Ludo and asked him to watch the game.

"Has Gopi come?" It was jijaji. Gopi got up with folded hands and paid his respects. Krishna came forward, patted him and asked: "You've come alone?"

"Yes, ma had come to see me off at the bus stop, on the main road."

"I hope you are studying properly."

Gopi nodded, smiled and kept quiet.

A little while later, Lacchmi brought tea-cups on a tray. "You could have brought something from the bazar," Krishna said—

"We had sweets left over from the morning," Lacchmi said putting the tray on the table. Krishna poured tea in the cups and gave a cup to Gopi. He looked at didi and

took a sip. But, O God! his mouth burnt. The cup slipped and broke into pieces on the floor. Some drops fell on his coat. Poor thing. He got up terrified.

"Oh, do not worry," Krishna helped Gopi stand up. But Ratan and Shyam could not control their laughter. They were trying to suppress it behind their palms, closing their mouths. Gopi looked at his didi. Tears filled his eyes. He was given tea in another cup but he felt as if there was no sweetness in it. He felt as though he has come to an alien world. It was not the world where he wanted to come.

In the evening Lacchmi asked Gopi to go out and play with Ratan and Shyam.

"I will not go," said Gopi firmly.

"Why? Go, play for sometime. Meanwhile I will make food ready," Lacchmi said and rushed to the kitchen. Gopi could not tolerate this indifference. He wanted to sit near his didi in the kitchen and chat while she was cooking but, unwillingly, he had to go out.

Eventually, they went to a small park near the house. Ratan and Shyam's friends were already there. The two boys started selecting their partners to play kabaddi. Everyone was taken except Gopi. No one wanted the boy with topi, coat and 'Lillybilly' shoes, too funny as a partner. So Ratan took him on his side. Gopi removed his topi, coat and shoes and kept them aside. Kabaddi began. Boys started running into the opposite side and employed their strategies to win. Slowly the play was at its peak and Gopi was in for trouble. He was heftier than other boys, so all the boys pounced on him. But Gopi did not allow anyone to even touch him. Boys were irritated. One of them, somehow, was able to catch hold of him and suddenly everyone was crushing Gopi. So much so that his whole body was scratched. Blood streamed from his nose. He was weeping inside. He wanted to weep on a

sympathising shoulder. But there was no one. All the boys fled, even Ratan and Shyam. He picked up his topi, coat and shoes and went home. Didi was in the kitchen. Ratan and Shyam were sitting in the courtyard engrossed in books. They saw him coming, but hid their faces behind the books.

Meanwhile, Lacchmi came out and was terrified to see Gopi's condition, "What happened?"

"I was injured."

"How?"

"While playing."

"Can't you look after yourself while playing?" Lacchmi scolded him, pulled his arm and said, "Come, I will apply some tincture iodine."

Gopi was somehow holding his tears. He remembered how in the village didi used to soothe him with a cloth dipped in hot water and applied oil whenever he was wounded and when mother asked "what happened?" she used to tell her something else to avoid the scolding.

But now? He stood there sulking.

Krishna returned in the night after tuitions and all sat for dinner. When he came to know of Gopi's injuries he pulled the ears of Ratan and Shyam and asked why they allowed this to happen. Shyam started weeping. Lacchmi made him sit on her lap and fed him with her own hands. Gopi would have liked to be fed like that. He felt suffocated. He had come here to sit in his sister's lap but he did not get the privilege. He could not eat properly; merely pecked at his food. Krishna noticed this. Meanwhile, Lacchmi said, "He did not get lassi. What taste will be there in dinner for him?"

Lacchmi put a cot for Gopi by the side of her cot, and lying on the bed started talking about the village again. But Gopi's mind was not there. Lacchmi thought he was feeling sleepy. "Sleep," she said and turned towards

Krishna. Suddenly, Ratan and Shyam, who were sleeping on one bed, fought. "Bhabhi, Shyam is hitting me with his legs." Saying this Ratan kicked Shyam and Shyam cried as though he was bitten by a scorpion. Lacchmi quickly got up and took Shyam to her bed. She soothed him and asked him to sleep with her. Gopi was seeing all this, lying quietly on the other bed. He had planned to sneak into his didi's bed when Ratan and Shyam fell asleep. But now Shyam was sleeping with his didi—what has happened to his didi? Suddenly he remembered his mother. Tears flowed down his cheeks. He did not know when he fell asleep amidst his tears.

He woke up late in the morning.

When Lacchmi woke him, Gopi arose as from a nightmare.

Lacchmi peered into his face. He looked sick.

"Gopi, what has happened to you?"

"I will go home—to mother."

"But you have just come here".

Lacchmi said, "Why not stay for a few more days."

"No, I want to go home," Gopi said stubbornly.

Lacchmi was astonished with the firmness in his voice and face. When Krishna came to know of this, he also was surprised. What was the matter? Could he not have stayed for a few more days? But Gopi was adamant. He would not listen to anyone. Lacchmi was baffled and sad. Finally, Krishna decided to take a day's leave from the school to take him back to the village the next day. By evening he would be back in town.

They were to go by the next day's bus. When Gopi got ready to go, Lacchmi could not stop her tears. She hugged Gopi in such a way that Gopi wished he had remained there. Seeing his didi weep, his heart ached. Only if he could live here permanently.... However, his didi would always hug him like this. But how could he remain here?

Jijaji was waiting for him to leave his didi and come out. It was time for the bus.

When Gopi came out of the house, even Ratan and Shyam felt sad. They wished he had stayed there for a few more days. It would be good.

Gopi returned to his village leaving all his wishes unfulfilled behind. He was his old self and again like a brooklet baffling after the rains.

Mother asked him repeatedly why he had returned so early? But Gopi would not tell her the real reason. What was he to say? He did not know why he could not talk about his didi any more. Mother felt he had matured, become more quiet and reserved. But what could she do! The boy told her nothing. After coming back from the school he would go out alone. Sometimes to the well, sometimes to the distant hills hither and thither. He became uneasy and irritable.

That evening when mother was milking the cow Gopi came and quietly stood behind her. Mother looked at him and then continued milking. She saw him again, standing far. She asked him, "What is the matter, Gopi?"

Gopi said; "Mother, now when didi comes here, will she milk the cow?"

"Why not?" asked mother filling the pot.

"Will she take the cow for grazing also?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Will she get water from the well?"

"Yes, if she did not, what would she do here?"

Then Gopi came close to his mother. He was silent for a moment and then asked her softly, "Ma, when will didi come?"

Mother stopped milking the cow, fixed her gaze on him and asked in a surprised voice, "Arre, had you not visited her just recently?"

"I met her there, ma. But when will she come here?"  
Mother could not understand. And Gopi was tearful.  
He did not know how to convey his thoughts....

*Translated from Dogri by A.V. Rammurty*



## AT WHAT PRICE, MY BROTHERS

*Mulk Raj Anand*

“**A**t what price, my brothers, at what price is this freedom when everyone is hoarding! After all, how many meals can a man eat! How many clothes can he wear?... The real freedom is in renunciation...”

This is what Sardar Tara Singh philosophised to his fellowmen as he sat on a charpai under the pipal tree on the edge of Sohna village. And the wise words seemed very profound, as he rubbed his venerable head with the palms of his hands and smoothed it into shape after the siesta, pronouncing the holy words of the Sikh faith.

The audience, usually three or four drivers of trucks on the way to Rajasthan, who sputtered over saucers of hot tea, fetched from the nearby wayside tea shop run by Sukha Ram, nodded assent somewhat boredly.

“At what price, my brothers!” he repeated, almost as though to prick their consciences, in case they were carrying overweight on their lorries or carrying contraband

or smuggling. And when they disappeared he spoke to himself: "I must do something so that I can be free to roam around..."

More often than not in spite of the cynicism of the audience, the words were magic to the ears of the listeners, because one of the drivers paid for Tara Singh's tea, with a shrugged shoulder show of generosity.

At what price, my brothers, now think of the cost of lentils touching the ceiling... It is all the price of freedom. Everyone is free now to do what he likes... And he whispered to himself: "I am more free than all of you, the really free one, as I go where I like!"

And wheat?... a grimy cleaner added.

"And now look at the price of gram flour!..." a driver mocked averting his face from Tara Singh.

"At what price, my brothers, may the wrath of the Gods descend upon the traders... Things were never so bad!..."

And then the company dispersed, leaving Tara Singh, the mystic sage, to have another snooze, until the contingent of another truck alighted to stretch their limbs and to part-take of the thick bread and milk-sugar-tea from Sukha Ram's stall.

One of the drivers would ask Sukha Ram about the identity of the leisurely Tara Singh.

The shrewd, lean vendor would lift one eye towards the sage and always said laconically:

"I can not make him out!... To be sure, he seems to me to be an actor with a dreamy nature, talking to others and then talking to himself. He is crazy perhaps. He has the eyes of a hawk. He recites the *Japji*. But he has acquired the power of juggling with words and can prove that man can only be free if he leaves home and does what he likes!"

"If you talk holy words all the time, you can certainly impress people in our country", commented the driver.

"I think he knows that holy words can be repeated without exciting suspicion..." said Sukha Ram. "Actually, I would like to know what he whispers to himself all the time..."

"Has he one person in him, who talks to himself, other who sermonizes to us. The real him I do not know about that... That is his secret..."

The tea-stall vendor said the last words in a soft whisper, as though he was frightened of being overheard.

But, as it always happens with a deaf man, the words you do not want him to hear are exactly the ones which are received most clearly on the tympanic membrane of his ears.

"I do not care what you say about me", Tara Singh said to the air. "I have faith in the Masters and in the freedom from all bonds..."

And then he drew back into himself, folded his legs to his stomach, as though he felt the chill of the rainy season making a snail of him, but really to ward off the attack on his secret life.

After a while, he surveyed the landscape of the hills tapering off towards the Delhi ridge, rain-soaked and green, and he lay listening to the sound of water rushing through the monsoon nullah. And, affecting the casual effrontery of the sage intent upon withdrawal, he seemed to have stepped out of the environment, indifferent to the gossip of Sukha Ram and his clients.

"May be, he has reached there!" the Vendor said to the driver, hoping that his praise would cancel out the earlier denigration. "To be sure, Sardar Tara Singh has the capacity to let his soul 'ray out' and thus come into touch with the Gods, even as he is able to influence people... Sometimes, I have even felt that there is a radiance around his head like the halo of a saint..."

"One year, forget it", said the driver. "All the leaders seem to have a radiance also before the yokels, especially when they were eloquent about curing the ills of the country in six months..." And he spat the phlegm out of his mouth, as though to give symbolic significance to his bitter humour. And, assembling his flowing loin cloth he proceeded towards his lorry.

"If my soul can ray out", mused Sardar Tara Singh to himself, then I can attain transcendent powers, become completely free from all the worldly things..."

"The humble folk are also free", said Sukha Ram, "doing the chores, earning a living as householders, busy all day, serving, tormented, yet alive, surviving..."

As the summer evening lengthened into twilight, Sardar Tara Singh took the bus up to Badal, a village about five miles away on the roadside.

He was talking to himself all the way. He was flushed with the warmth of his own words as they lapped up to his dribbling mouth. And the excitement of knowing that he had the power to 'ray out' seemed to fill him with a sense of humour.

"Whose mother has died", he asked as he got up to the plinth by the bus-stand. Where the barber Prem Nath was showing the mirror to a customer whose head he had shaven clean.

All the anxious passengers, who were waiting solemnly for the bus going towards Sohna looked askance at him. The best thing is to be free—not to have a home to go to.

"Ao Sardarji!", the barber said. "Everyone according to: his own... They have relations waiting at home..."

"Your talk is always clever talk", said Tara Singh. "And you have converted me... I agree one must have a home

and children. In spite of its torments, the householder's life is the good life..."

"By your grace, Sardarji", answered the barber, feigning humility.

Tara Singh remained silent, sat down cross-legged with some dignity, leaned over to the barber and said: "As you know, I can not patronise you because our religion enjoins long hair, but I have a small business for you to do on my behalf—To be sure, I shall pay the commission..."

"You mean a bribe", said the shaven-headed client of the barber. "We of the Muslim faith would rather not pay anything, than call a gratuity by the respectable Angrezi word 'commission'... We are also against usury."

Sardar Tara Singh remained calm against this statement of puritan morality, though, inside him, he was disturbed by the dialogue between his two selves.

The barber looked open-mouthed at both the men. He was a gossip, not a philosopher.

"At what price, my brothers, at what price, this kind of talk!" commented Tara Singh. "I would rather do what others do. Buy and sell, than be a burden on others by begging as a Sadhu. Though I want to be really free from earthly bonds and not fall a prey to greed...."

"Now, tell me, Sire, what service I can do for you?" the worldly barber began, to change the conversation from religion to practicalities.

"My heart is set on renunciation, brother, because I can not get too much from my acre... The maize I had sown this year was flooded. I will walk and preach the true faith of freedom from bondage..."

"But what can I do apart from offering my adoration to you for your noble intentions?"

"My brother, I have a widowed daughter. If only I could get her off my hands, I should be able to begin a new life by building a retreat, away from it all..."

The barber, Prem Nath, who was known to be a wizard in fixing up matches, had gained his reputation from his direct approach, saying things which other people hesitated to mouth, without beating about the bush.

"*Acha, how much do you want by way of dowry from bridegroom?*"

Sardar Tara Singh felt that he did not even have to irradiate his ray divine to get across the distance, discomfort and oppression of opening up a subject which was embarrassing even to a go-between. All the same, he was sweating, lest the people waiting for the bus may have heard the talk between him and the barber. He swayed a little, put on an air of beatitude and entered upon the trivialities, as though they were sacred matters, by changing his words with all the strength of conviction.

"My brother, our orthodox priests, the wolves to whom the sheep go in their distress, discourage to remarriage of widows. I want to restore the true faith of our Masters by flouting the taboo..."

"Blessed are the brave, Sardarji!"

On seeing the barber warming up to him, Sardar Tara Singh now went out of the shell of his handsome presence.

"What is more, I shall defy the convention that the father of the girl must give dowry!"

"To be sure..."

"I do not see why I, a poor farmer, true to original faith of liberation from all worldliness, would pay for the ceremonies which the first Masters have denounced! And, like a true Sikh I do not believe in caste either..."

"True word!"

Sardar Tara Singh paused for a decisive moment, with a theatricality which was obvious from distended eyes. But the fact that he looked straight into the eyes of the knowing barber, disarmed the latter, who blushed.

At that juncture, Sardar Tara Singh mustered all the streams of electricity in his frame, strengthened them by clearing his throat, induced the holy mood by shaking his eyes detachedly and condensed his speech into the words:

“Five hundred rupees.”

The intensity of the concentrated glance had made the barber into a fascinated rabbit. All the shrewdness of the years of go-betweenness was upset by the greater directness of the sage’s approach. But as he withdrew his gaze to ponder for a second, he realised that there was no bride-groom in these hard times who would pay five hundred for a widow. A virgin may fetch even a thousand—but a widow?...

Like a flash of mystic vision, the ray out of Sardar Tara Singh penetrated the darkness of the barber’s brain: “The sage does not believe in caste”, he said to himself. He blushed. Then he hung his head down. And, out of the humility of centuries of low-casteness, he waited to utter words which might bring disaster or triumph.

At last, the magnetic fluid in the stare of Tara Singh over-flooded to him in benign condescension, and a soft whisper smoothened the rough edges of doubt.

“Speak your mind”, urged Tara Singh.

“All these years, the barber began, with a hangdog look, I have arranged for the happiness of others. I must have secured a hundred brides for this village in ten years. But while they all drink the nectar of the bliss of marriage, I have remained on the banks of the reservoir of life. No heir babbles sweetly on my knees.... As you are of the true faith.”

"Speak...", urged Sardar Tara Singh with the maximum intensity. "And it shall be done! Like the Gurus, I do not believe in caste."

"Acha, then, please give your widowed daughter in marriage to me.... She will be the most precious gift in my household. And I shall worship her... I will pay five hundred..."

"Done", said Sardar Tara Singh with the alacrity of the magician, who nets money from the air before the illusioned gaze of his audience.

The barber bowed before the venerable father-in-law and touched his feet.

"I shall go out and renew the dying faith in the other world", the oracular Sardar said. "I shall proclaim that I Tara Singh, have renounced my high caste and given my daughter in marriage to a barber..."

The expanding soul of the barber was contracting at the thought that he would now have to pay up the five hundred he had offered. And yet this was the highest moment of his life. After all he would have a bride in his home. There had been no one to cook for him since his first wife died.

"Come to my modest dwelling", Prem Nath said.

"Take this auspicious coconut as the first offering", said Sardar Tara Singh, untying the end of the apron he carried.

And he kept up the pressure of his irradiations in order to bind the barber to his own soul, beyond any danger of the man slipping. He benignly put his arms around the waist of the would be son-in-law in a half embrace and proceeded.

\* \* \*

The barber went into a dark cell in the first lane beyond the drain which separated the main road from the village

of Badal, while Sardar Tara Singh sat securely on a shaving chair, which was the only furniture the dark chamber.

After eternities of waiting. Prem Nath lit a candle, hard wooden, groped around, dug up a box, and took out bundles of ten rupee notes from the 'commission' he had earned and hidden against insecurity.

Sardar Tara Singh was brooding on the dilatability of the soul, even while keeping the apparition of his prophetic presence together as a kind of aura about him.

The barber came out and put the wads of notes in the Sardar's hand.

Sardar Tara Singh did not count the money as befitted a man of faith, intent on things beyond worldly goods, on the ultimate freedom from bondage.

"Let a small marriage party of five come to Sohna tomorrow, so that we can celebrate the wedding without loss of time. I want to begin my preaching tour as soon as possible."

The barber noted and knelt down before the sage, touching his feet with his head.

"True word!", the prophet said as he got up to go. "I will meet you by the tea-stall of Sukha Ram, outside Sohna..."

I will see you to the bus, the barber said. "And tomorrow by the same bus I and four people will come... people will laugh if I come with a band..."

\* \* \*

The marriage party of barber Prem Nath reached the tea-stall of Sukha Ram outside Sohna village as the hour of twilight entered the night.

Sardar Tara Singh had never been heard of as a resident of this village.

Sukha Ram, the tea-vendor, told the barber that strange sage did stay for few days under the Pipal tree there, but had left at about dusk the previous day by the bus for Badal village.

Frantic with confusion, pale with chagrin, and nearly tottering, the barber said to his companions: "Let us go to the police...."

"At what price, brother? at what price, freedom?" Sukha Ram said. "The crook is the most free of all in this world...."



## THE STORY OF A HAPPY FAMILY

*Raghuveer Chaudhari*

This is the story of a small and happy family. It is a happy family, as there is no cause to call it unhappy, it is small as it is quite new. They are only three in the family. There is a violet coloured name-plate on which it is written in golden words—Shree Suresh Shah, Diploma-in-Chemical Technology. Just below that there is a silver plate indicating if the boss is 'In' or 'Out'. Even if Shree Shah is at home, the name plate shows 'Out' instead of 'In'. While leaving home, once he just looked at the name plate casually and he just pushed that silver plate a little. Then he read, he wondered a while, Shree Suresh Shah, Diploma-in-Chemical Technology, 'out', why is it so! When he came before an hour, he had just done 'In' of 'Out'. Who changed this! Yes, Veena had just gone out for milk. This must be her trick. Probably, she intends to give a feel to the visitors, as if I am 'out' even though I am at home. She does not want any disturbance in our solitude. She is loving. Even if there is no talk, solitude gives oneness.

Two to five men out of a hundred have such a wife. My horoscope is good but this is too much of love. If stars are powerful the importance of soul power is acknowledged. There is a saying too "Heavier floods and deeper love do not last long." In so far as my horoscope is concerned, the warmth of a wife is likely to be long lasting. According to Rishi Parasar the demon star's lengthened shade will have no impact on the Mars' fall-back and even the weak star does give fruitful result for the commanding star. I need not bother about it, but why should I not practise truth even in the tiniest matter! I must tell Veena that whenever I am 'In' she should not make it 'Out'.

"Veena, Oh Veena! Where's she!"

"Ah.... Veena, do not you hear!"

"Say it a little louder then only I shall hear!"

"What are you doing?"

"Sleeping".

Sureshbhai realized that Veena was not in a mood to give a modest reply. Veena was near the kitchen door and she had a son in her lap, and was trying to make him drink milk with a spoon. Totally engrossed, Baba was making gestures with one hand, though his delicate fists were tight, yet he was trying to catch that spoon. On seeing such a sight, Sureshbhai felt very happy. Veena restored. He might have rebuked, but his spirit to scold her just vanished and he sat in front of Veena. Yet Veena did not look at him. But her facial expressions suggested that she was enjoying the presence of her loving husband. While seeing the newly born baby play, any husband is likely to be forgetting himself. The silence of the wife and the husband was weighing due to the sweet disturbances of Suketu and their eyes took a swing of a butterfly.

As soon as Baba finished drinking milk, Sureshbhai boxed Baba's ear. On seeing it, Veena laughed heartily.

On hearing Veena's laughter his heart often throbbed. He had heard the laugh of many more girls ever since he was studying but Veena's laughter was musical, it was an event by itself. As per routine, today also he was influenced by that laughter and he just forgot whatever he wanted to say—it went to that extent that he asked Veena.

“What did I say?”

“Is it in your horoscope that your wife would tell you everything that you wish to ask?”

“Ah dear, it is unfair for you to make fun of me. Wives always worshipped their husbands in our country.”

“It is still practised; but there is a change in the party. Nowadays husbands fulfil their duty. Though it is conditional, a wife ought to be beautiful.”

“Yes, you are beautiful!”

“No, not the least, am I!”

“Who told you?”

“How.... don't I look into the mirror?”

“You need not give opinion for yourself. You should give opportunity to me. Ah.... dear, you are not modest. Did you follow?”

“Yes, Yes, followed!”

“Take this Baba, he is asleep!”

“Leave him in the cradle and then....”

“Then what!”

“You may go out, if you feel like...” “Oh yes, I did remember.”

“I did remember. I wanted to ask you why did you make 'Out' on the name plate even though I was at home!”

“To my mind, you are not at home in reality even if you are 'In'.”

“What does that mean?!”

"I have said it in the understandable language. Since you have started this astrology business...."

"But my dear, astrology is shastra truly it is a science. It is not sorcery!"

"I know it."

"That is not the matter of my being fanatic about it."

"But how much time do you spend after it?"

"If a fellow does not read a novel or even a short story but brings books of astrology and slurs over those pages, does it make any sense?"

"Even if astrology is a science, why should we study it at all?"

"Who has asked us to study?"

"There are innumerable professionals. Whosoever goes for service, should show one's horoscope."

"Now without going to service and during the lockout of a mill I could get some work. This year, our Venus is fairly good and after May even the Mars would be highly profitable."

"Bum, now do not bore me, you may go and come back; meanwhile, I shall finish."

"Did you bring your horoscope?"

"But why do you want it?"

"Horoscopes were considered before our marriage. I am never going to die as a widow. What else do you want?"

"That is all true; but now I have learnt, I have seen many horoscopes and it won't do, if I do not see yours."

"Get ready today, we shall eat somewhere outside, on the way you may collect your horoscope from your father's house."

"Better you go, You may tell bhabhi, she might search it out."

"Is it fair if I go all alone?"

"Come on, get up, be ready."

At last Veena had to be ready. Sureshbhai used to ask her for the horoscope whenever she went to her father's house. Veena used to forget it invariably. Sureshbhai often felt ill about it. He used to ask her if she had no faith in his knowledge of astrology. Veena used to say that only a knowledgeable person could give opinion about his knowledge:

"I have done my B.A. with Gujarati Special and there was not a word of astrology in the syllabus. It was very good you did not know. But as your mill closed for two months and you went to consult an astrologer in search of employment, and the astrologer told you that you would be placed back in the same job. Meanwhile the same-mill re-opened, and since then you have been a crazy follower of astrology."

"The day you brought the First Book, all the stars are at clash in our home. Even the weakest star does not leave us. It is terrifying." On hearing Veena's such words, Sureshbhai thought that probably Veena did know something about astrology. He tried to drag her into discussion. Though he had told her repeatedly to bring her horoscope, she did not bring it. Somehow there was no response from her. Whatever time it might take for its search, he decided firmly not to leave that place without obtaining it. It was hardly a distance of two furlongs, yet he hired a riksha, he took a big kerchief to cover Baba, he was asleep. He took him in his lap and got into it. She took her seat very close to him-quietly. Thus she was close to Baba. As she reached her father's house, she handed over Baba to her Bhabhi and went in for cooking. Veena's elder brother seemed to be against astrology. No astrologer had helped him in his progress. He started citing innumerable past experiences of false astrologers. Sureshbhai told

him that probably his very horoscope might be wrong. Meanwhile, Bhabhi brought horoscopes of everybody. One of them was of Veena, he kept it aside and started giving a thought to individual horoscopes. Having made restrained predictions, he was just lost in counting the predominant stars of Veena's horoscope. He had the horoscope in the other hand while having his meal. He read that the Mars-Venus conjunction might result in love failure. The rest was lively.

"Did Veena love anyone before the marriage?"

Probably she tried to hide it and that was perhaps the reason for avoiding the horoscope matter till now! As they reached home, he became very serious. He could not rid his mind of the thought. He nourished such ill-thought. She might be offended if he were to ask her straight! If she had hidden it intentionally even today she might not reveal me the truth and what could be the proof! Though the horoscope is really good and the Jupiter is very powerful....Eight, twelve, that is, 20, 20 and 8 make 28. It is perfectly all right. She is running 28 years.

After changing dress Veena came and sat by his side quite carefully. The swing had taken a slight jerk. Even Sureshbhai felt a little shaky. For a while his balanced approach was disturbed.

"Do you think my horoscope is equally false as that of my brother....?"

"It is not false at all but....!"

"But what?"

"The Mars-Venus conjunction...!"

"It suggests parting....!"

"Do not worry, I shall go to my father's...!"

"Please do not take it otherwise..."

"May I ask you one thing?"

"Won't you win over even if I am offended?"

While saying so Veena gave a motion to the swing and as there was some familiar film song on the neighbour's radio, she started clapping with a hand which had a ring on it.

With a very heavy heart Sureshbhai asked, "How can a man live without love?"

"Did you ever love any one?"

"It would be nice of you if you do not make statements...!"

"I am keen to know your past."

"My... my past is quite spotless as that the sheet of Kabir."

*"Das Kabir Jatanshi Oddhi, Jyoun Ki tyon rakhdi Chadariya"* (Saint Kabir took much care of the sheet he used to put on, he left it unspoilt due to simple pious living). And thus she started singing. Sureshbhai liked Veena's voice, yet, he stopped her and asked:

"Did you fail in your early affair?"

"I fail to understand, what you want to know. Look, let me be free from your suspicious approach."

"I have never flirted. Nobody... except you."

"I just told you about feelings?"

"Feelings... why do you object to that?"

"No, never mind, I just wanted to know that is not love but...." Just love very much like that feeling.... Oh yes I had it for a youth... Even today, I remember him. He was honest. Even at all cost, he desired to be truthful. Really speaking I had no acquaintance at all. There was a groom-search for me. When he came to see me, accompanied by his elder brother, I had some talk. After that we just met by chance twice or thrice. Once we had tea in a hotel. There was a possibility of our betrothal. His astrologer had liked

my horoscope very much. Our astrologer had also given a positive opinion. But he came a day before the fixing up of betrothal ceremony. I assumed that probably he had come to see me. I got ready. But he had come with a copy of horoscope.

"This is my original horoscope," he just showed me the page of the important predictions. My elder brother and bhabhi read it and kept it. They assured him to consulting an astrologer. During this time I was asked to be in for some work. Meanwhile, that fellow left. It was predicted that he had a short span life and a strong possibility of an accident. The very next day my brother rejected that proposal. Though I personally did not like it. While persuading, Bhabhi told me that it would have been a different matter if there had been an affair, even a risk might have been taken. But this was very much like choosing drinking filtered water.

"There is no scarcity of bridegrooms in our community," Bhabhi emphatically said.

"And within the six month's time... you met me."

"What was his name?"

"Madhav Vasantlal."

"But.... that's the son of an oil merchant!.... was he an engineer?"

"Exactly.... but how's that you know him?"

"Do you not know that he died in an accident?"

"At that time you were to deliver the baby..."

Veena just got up. Sureshbhai did feel the swing jerk all over.

For a second, a feel of widowhood was visible on her face. It looked as if she were broken. After sometime once again Sureshbhai expressed his faith in the astrology.

"It was very good that you did not marry him, otherwise by now you might have been a widow."

"Perhaps my stars might have saved him?" It appeared as if her faith was deeply rooted.

Both of them sat silently. Veena was just struggling to be composed. Due to that imprint of the past remembrance a tear ran down from her eyes. She went to the toilet. Once again she had tears on her washed face. On the other hand Sureshbhai thought that Veena had an affair in her life, so there was no possibility of the demon stars' (The Rahu) impact on their relationship. As long as life matters, our love shall continue.

By that time she lolled near the main door as if on a new safeguard. But Sureshbhai's voice had no volume.

*Translated from Gujarati by Suresh K. Shukla*



## SLIPPERS

*Kamleshwar*

**I**t is a very short story.

I had to go to the ICU on the seventh floor of All India Medical Institute. As I walked away after parking the car, my mind took a philosophical leap. How much misery and suffering is there in this world! There is an endless battle with death... and the people seething under this misery—they are all alike. Pain and torment is a reality—no matter who is at the receiving end. It does not distinguish between people. The colour of a mother's milk is the same throughout the world. Blood and tears are also of the same colour. Just as one cannot change the colour of milk, blood or tears, there can be no differentiation among the colours of misery, suffering and pain. This profound philosophising gave me some relief... centuries of wisdom was finding an outlet through me. Being heir to an old civilization gives you the advantage of fishing out a philosophical answer to any accident of life. It may not provide a solution, but you definitely get an abstract philosophical answer.

An added advantage of old civilizations is that the torchbearers of their traditions are in possession of an intangible power called the *atma*. The centuries-old tradition annihilates the shortcomings of human life...the philosophical take stressing the temporality of life brushes aside the myriad travails of daily living.

I recollected the words of my friend who had informed me about Sandhya's surgery, advising that it would be well to visit her. He gave me the directions to her cabin—the operation theatre is on the eighth floor and Sandhya's ICU on the seventh. Sandhya's large intestine had been removed and the next forty-eight hours were critical...

The way to the ICU was through the emergency ward. An agonizing cry emanated from the ward—a patient was screaming in unbearable pain. The shriek pierced your soul. Is it possible to differentiate between one cry of pain and another? Like the colours of milk, blood and tears, the torment in the cry too is the same. Can there be any difference in the expression of pain?

The friend, who had advised me to pay a customary visit to Sandhya, was from Allahabad. He too was the inheritor of the same centuries-old tradition. In a typical Allahabadi style he said—"I do not care a damn! After retirement I will build a hut on the bank of Ganga. I will plant a dozen or so palm trees... get a fishing rod... will surely catch some fish by noon... then gather the toddy which trickled at night and put it in the fridge..."

"Fridge?"

"Of course! I'll live like a modern sadhu. Fry fishes and wash them down with toddy! What more can one desire? And then the pension would also be there. Why should I be greedy for more? Unnecessarily the soul will be trapped in the 'here and now.' Toddyl and fish! The soul will leave for the final journey satiated with toddy and

fish... without any pain or suffering! But you definitely go and see Sandhya... she is critical."

It felt good to witness how unperturbed my friend was regarding his future.

This thought was still giving me peace, though interrupted by the piercing cry which continued from the emergency ward. It haunted me as I waited restlessly for the lift.

At last the lift came. "Seven," I said and began to think about Sandhya. Two or three ward boys got out on the third and fourth floor.

The lift stopped on the fifth floor where some people were waiting to go up. That five year old boy was among these people—wearing an oversized striped hospital shirt. Perhaps his father, it surely must be his father, held him in his arms. The boy had small blue Hawaii slippers stuck to his tiny feet.

Trying to retrieve his falling slippers the child said, "Baba! Slipper..."

The father adjusted the slippers on the boy's feet. The ward boy offering the wheelchair said, "come, sit on this." The child smiled faintly as the ward boy helped him into the chair. He suffered some discomfort but kept laughing as he supported himself against the armrests. He was conscious of the pain but not at all conscious of the reason for the pain. He was sitting on the chair as if seated on a throne...the chair was too big for him. The ward boy pushed the chair into the lift. His father was also by his side. He kept caressing the child's head affectionately.

The lift stopped on the seventh floor, but I did not exit. A couple of people went out. The lift stopped on the eighth. The operation theatre was here. When the door opened, a nurse carrying all the prescriptions looked at the boy and exclaimed, "There you come!"

The boy slowly smiled at the nurse as if answering in the affirmative. His shy eyes were radiant with the milky glow of innocence. The wheelchair came out of the lift with a jerk and the nurse patted his shoulder lightly.

“Baba! Slipper! My slipper....”

One of his slippers had fallen near the lift. His father picked it up and put it on his foot. The boy squeezed the toes of both his feet and secured the slippers.

The lift door closed and it went down.

The ward boy pushed the chair towards the verandah of the operation theatre. The nurse also went with him. His father followed them slowly.

It was then I realized that I had to go to the seventh floor. Sandhya was there. I used the stairs to come down one floor. Sandhya's husband, who was a doctor, recognised me and stepped forward to shake hands with me. His grip conveyed despair and helplessness. We were silent for a while. Then I said, “I came to know only yesterday when I returned. How did it happen all of a sudden?”

“No, it was not all of a sudden. There was bleeding earlier but it was controlled. It started again after 15 days. Excessive bleeding... the operation lasted four hours... and you know we doctors are the worst patients!” He was referring to Sandhya who was also a doctor.

“Yes! You of course would be fully apprised of the situation... even Sandhya must be aware of everything.”

“But she is being very courageous! She is not in a position to speak. Even the pulse could be felt only near the neck. She is on artificial respiration. In a way her entire body is at rest and everything is working on artificial support.” Sandhya's doctor husband was briefing me in a medical jargon and I tried to keep pace with him, I would often divert the conversation elsewhere.

"Sandhya's brother also came this morning. He managed to get a ticket *via* Japan."

"That is good."

"Would you like to see her?"

"Sure, if it is possible."

"Come. But you will not be allowed to go inside. All the doctors here are friends, but..."

"No no, that is alright..."

"She can not even speak... though today she is conscious. She writes down whatever she wishes to convey," he said pointing to a cabin.

I saw Sandhya through a glass wall. She was unrecognizable. Two doctors and a nurse were attending to her. And then she was surrounded with so many pipes and machines that it was difficult to recognize her.

Sandhya was conscious. She was looking at the doctor. The doctor was caressing her hand while telling her something. I was sad to see her in this condition. She was so helpless. One is utterly powerless when confronted with illness or fate. I silently prayed for Sandhya—to whom, I do not know. One tends to remember God in such places. It is worth acknowledging. His status and murmuring a few words of prayers, especially if it is for someone's well being.

We came back to the verandah, a little away from the ICU. There was no place to sit. The verandah was not meant to seat people. Sandhya's or the doctor's sister was sitting on a sheet on the floor. A few friends of the doctor were standing in a group.

"There will be another operation," said Sandhya's husband. "The small intestine will be joined to the system... but she has to stabilize first, then only the question of recovery arises... that will take about three months. I think I will take her to America after that."

"That would be good."

After that we continued to make small talks. I wanted to divert his mind from Sandhya's critical situation. What else could I do? And it did not seem appropriate to stand before him in complete silence.

After excusing myself under the pretence of smoking a cigarette, I went and stood close to a window. Hot winds were blowing outside. Some people were moving on the ground floor. They seemed very helpless and despondent and prayers for their well-being flowed from my lips. Come to think of it—it seems man has made intense and sublime connections with fellow creatures, but has not been able to forge such a relationship with God. He is the Giver and man the receiver. It is such a one-sided relationship. And if you grant that it is God who made man, then you begin to lose faith in God's ability. He has been creating man since time immemorial, yet in spite of umpteen attempts he has failed to produce a complete and finished product. There surely is something lacking somewhere in God's planning. May be His long-trusted potter is supplying Him sub-standard clay to mould humans. Who can find the secret behind this? One secret gives birth to another. May be that is why man has let God remain a mystery. If a power or force is not able to stand the test of faith, then it is better to let it remain shrouded in mystery. What is the alternative?

A gust of hot winds singed my face. The doctor was surrounded by his well-wishers and everyone's face was alarmed.

The blood pressure is falling...

It was evident from the flurry of activity in the ICU that a difficult situation was at hand. It became known after some time that the needle had come loose. It had been set right and the blood pressure was now being recorded properly. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. It

is not an easy task to fight with death. God created death, but so has man. On one side man struggles for life, on the other he allocates death. This is life! This paradox and duality constitutes the basis of living as well as the means to reach the stage of non-dualism and sameness. When spiritual non-dualism surfaces at the plane of worldliness and resolves the dilemmas of mankind, then only it is called the philosophy of equanimity.

The cigarette left a bitter after taste in my mouth. The hot winds continued its attack. The burning cement floor stretched out like molten lava. A man was crossing it bare feet, blistering them.

I looked in the direction of the lift. The doctor guessed my intent, but just then some politician-type friend turned up. After preliminary inquiries, he almost started delivering a speech:

“Now after the Agni missile, India has become the third most powerful country and in the coming ten years no force can stop us from becoming a superpower. The Indian middle class today is larger than the total population of Britain and France. In terms of prosperity their middle class does not have the strength and resilience of the Indian middle class...”

Just then a tense nurse passed by and dead silence ensued. When the tension eased, I glanced towards the lift again. Doctor saheb got the point. “You have been here for a long time. You must have left so many things pending,” he said as he walked with me to the lift. It was going up. But I entered it, not wanting to keep the doctor waiting.

The lift reached the eighth floor. There were not many people there... except for a stretcher and two or three persons. The stretcher, along with the people, entered the lift. Lying on it was the same boy—unconscious and draped in a sheet. He was coming out after the operation.

The fine hair on his cheek and neck were drenched in sweat.

His father was holding a bottle of glucose attached through the tube to a needle piercing the vein of the boy's limp left arm. The father was constantly staring at him. He raised his other hand, probably wanting to remove the sweaty hair from the boy's forehead. But his fingers were entangled in the child's slippers... the tiny blue Hawaii slippers.

I looked at the child, and then at his hapless father.

I said impulsively—"His...."

"His leg has been amputated." The ward boy solved the father's problem by answering on his behalf.

"Oh! What had happened?" I asked the father. He kept quiet. His lips mumbled something and stopped... but he could not remain quiet for long. He replied after a minute—"His thigh bone was broken."

"Did he hurt himself?"

"No. He was crossing the road... a car hit him." He looked at me as if my car had been responsible for the accident.

Then he began staring at his son distractedly.

The lift stopped on the fifth floor. The children's ward was on this floor. Several people were standing outside the lift. They were impatiently waiting for the stretcher to come out. The ward boy pushed the stretcher with a jerk and the boy shook like a sack.

"Slowly," I said impulsively.

"He is unconscious. How will he know?" said the ward boy as he pushed the stretcher out of the lift.

His father stepped out of the lift, colliding with the open door. A nurse took the glucose bottle from his hand. The father threw the blue Hawaii slippers in a corner outside the lift. Then thinking for a moment that his son

might ask for them on regaining consciousness, he first picked one slipper... and then the other and followed the stretcher to the ward.

I do not know what his son will ask for when he recovers his senses—will he ask for the slippers or his leg....

People waiting impatiently entered the lift now. The liftman pressed the button. The door closed. And the closed iron chamber began its descent.

*Translated by Seema Sharma from the Hindi original "Chappal," Charchit Kahaniyan, 2001.*



## THE SHROUD

Premchand

**A**t the door of the hut, before a fire which had already gone out, sat father and son; inside lay Budhis, the son's young wife in the throes of child-birth. Now and then she let out wails heartrending enough to upset them.

It was a winter night. Nature seemed dumb, and the village was all but darkness.

"Looks as if she would not last," said Ghisu. "It has been a hectic day. Why not peep in and see?"

"If she must die why doesn't she hurry?" said Madhay, irritated. "What can I do about it?"

"You are a heartless lout," rejoined Ghisu. "She made you happy for one whole year, and now this callousness!"

"Maybe, but I can not stand her writhing and wriggling." Theirs was a family of cobblers notorious in the village. If Ghisu worked for one day, he would rest for three. Madhay was such a shirker that for every half an hour of work he would smoke for one hour. With the result that they hardly ever secured work. Neither would they dream of work if they had a handful of corn at home.

When they starved for two or three days, Ghisu would climb a tree and fell some firewood and Madhav would take it to the market and sell it. While the money lasted, the two would loaf around. Then starvation would compel them to gather twigs or search for some job.

There was no dearth of work in the village. It was a peasant community where labour was always in demand. These two, however, were sent for only when the employer was obliged to get one man's work done by two.

Had Ghisu and Madhav turned sadhus they would have been happy indeed, for they were contented by nature and had great patience.

Theirs was a strange existence. A few earthen pots in the hut was all they owned. Tattered rags covered their nakedness. Thus they floated through life, indifferent to everything. Heavily in debt, they suffered indignities, were even beaten up. But did they care?

So miserable was their life that people gave them petty loans even when there was little chance of their being repaid. When the harvest time came, they would pilfer potatoes and peas which they baked and ate or they dug up sugarcane which they munched at night.

Ghisu had spent sixty years in such precarious existence. And, like a worthy son, Madhav followed in his footsteps. In fact, the son was outdoing his veteran father. And now too they sat before the dying embers and baked the potatoes which they had pilfered from someone's field.

Ghisu's wife had died long ago, but Madhav was married only last year. Ever since Budhia had come she had tried to bring some sort of order in the household. She would grind corn or cut grass to buy a seer of wheat flour for these shameless creatures to devour. This had only made these parasites idler. They even gave themselves airs. When offered employment they would shamefacedly demand double the wages. And now this woman was dying

of labour pains and these two were waiting for her to die, so that they could sleep in peace!

Picking a potato from the ashes and peeling it, Ghisu said "Do peep in and see what is happening. Must be the doing of some evil spirit. Even a witch doctor here will charge you a rupee"

Madhav feared that if he went inside, Ghisu would gobble up most of the potatoes. He replied, "I am afraid to go in there."

"What is there to be afraid of when I am here?" asked Ghisu. "Why do not you go in yourself?" rejoined Madhav.

"When my wife died," went on Ghisu, "I did not budge from her side for full three days. But yours, won't she feel shy before me? I who have never seen her face all these days, must I now look on her naked shame? What a state she must be in? Seeing me she won't even be able to writhe and toss freely!"

"What is worrying me is, what shall we do if a baby is born? We have no molass, no oil, no dry ginger in the house."

"Everything will come; let God give the baby first! The very people who now grudge us a copper will send for us and offer us silver. I had nine sons and never a thing in the house. But God somehow shored me."

In a society where the lot of the hard-working peasant was not much better than theirs, and where only those who exploited the poor enjoyed the plums, such an attitude was nothing surprising. We might even say that Ghisu was much wiser than the peasants. Instead of following the herd of unthinking peasants, he had joined the unsavoury ranks of the idlers, though he lacked the means to follow the ways and principles of the tribe. And so while others of the tribe had become leaders and headmen of the village, he was looked down upon. But he had the consolation that despite his destitution, he did not have to work as

hard as the peasants, and that no one could take undue advantage of his simplicity and his misery.

The two went on picking up the potatoes and eating them burning hot. They had not eaten anything since yesterday and could not wait to let them cool. Their tongues were repeatedly scorched. Once peeled the potatoes did not seem too hot on the surface, but as soon as they were bitten into, the inside burnt their tongue, palate and throat. There was more hazard in keeping the burning balls in the mouth than to swallow them, for inside the stomach there was ample machinery to cool them down. And so they went on swallowing fast, although the effort brought tears to their eyes.

Ghisu thought of the Thakur's wedding feast he attended 20 years ago. The satisfaction which that feast gave him made it memorable. He remembered it to this day.

"Can not forget that feast," said Ghisu. "Never since then had I such a bellyful of such food. The bride's people had fed all and sundry, young and old, with *puris* fried in pure ghee. Chutney, *raita*, three vegetables cooked dry and one in curry, curd and sweets. How can I now describe how delicious the feast was! No rationing, mind you. You had everything you wanted and as much. The people ate and ate until there was no room for a sip of water. But still the attendants go on pouring hot, round, fragrant *kachauris* on the leaf-plates. We protest, spreading our hands over the plates but they kept on pouring. And after we had washed, they gave us betel leaf and cardamom. But how could I look at betel-leaf when I could hardly stand on my legs! I rushed straight to my bed and stretched myself. The Thakur was indeed a large-hearted fellow."

Relishing all these delicacies in his mind, Madhav said, "Nobody gives us such feasts these days."

"How can they?" replied Ghisu. "Those days were different. Nowadays every one thinks of economising. Do

not spend on weddings! Do not spend on the last rites! What, I ask them, will they do with all this money grabbed from the poor? The grabbing goes on all the same—the economy is only in spending."

"You must have had about 20 *puris*" asked Madhav.

"More than 20."

"I would have eaten 50."

"I could not have taken less than 50, I was a hefty fellow. You're not even half of me."

They finished the potatoes, drank some water and lay down near the fire, covering the bodies with their dhotis, their legs curled up beneath their bellies. Like two large pythons coiled

And Budhia went on moaning.

## II

In the morning Madhav went inside the hut. His wife lay cold, dead. Flies hovered round her face. The stony eyes stared fixedly upwards. The body was covered with dust. The child had died within the womb.

Madhav came running to Ghisu, and the two started wailing loudly and beating their chests.

The neighbours heard them wail and hastened to offer the customary condolences to the unfortunates.

But there was little time for much weeping. A shroud had to be procured and the firewood to cremate her; money was as scarce in the house as meat in a kite's nest.

Father and son hurried to the Zamindar weeping. The Zamindar hated the very sight of them. Time and again, he had thrashed them with his own hands, now for stealing and now for not turning up in time for work.

"What is the matter, Ghisua? Why this weeping?" asked the Zamindar contemptuously. "You are hardly to be seen



these days. Looks as though you do not want to live in this village."

Touching the ground with his head Ghisu said with tears in his eyes, "I am in great trouble, Master. Madhav's woman passed away last night. She was in great pain the whole night, Sire. We sat by her and got her what medicines we could, but she has deserted us. And now there is no one to give us a bread. We are undone, the home shattered. I am your slave, Master! Who but you will now make the last rites possible? We have spent everything we had on her illness. The body can be cremated only if the Master is kind. Where else can I go but to your door?"

The Zamindar had a kind heart, but to do a good turn to Ghisu was like dyeing a black blanket His first impulse was to tell him bluntly, "Get out of here. You never come when sent for, and today you are fawning on me because you are in dire need. You good for nothing *badmash*!"

But it was no occasion for anger or punishment. Fuming silently the Zamindar threw two rupees at them, without a look or word of consolation, as though casting off a burden.

Now that the Zamindar had parted with two rupees, how could the village money lenders and shopkeepers dare refuse! Ghisu knew well enough how to trumpet the Zamindar's favour. Some gave him a two-anna piece, some a four-anna bit. Within an hour he had collected full five rupees in cash. Besides, he got some foodgrain here, some firewood there.

At noon Ghisu and Madhav set out for the market to buy a shroud. Other helping hands began cutting bamboo and other wood. The kind hearted women of the village came to have a last look of the dead body and went back shedding tears over Budhia's fate.

## III

On reaching the market Ghisu said, "We have enough firewood, Madhav, to cremate her. Haven't we?"

"Yes, we have enough," replied Madhav. "What we need now is a shroud."

"Let us buy a cheap one then."

"Yes, of course. It will be dark by the time the body is taken out. Who sees the shroud at night?"

"What a silly custom that she who did not have a rug to cover her living body should need a new shroud on dying!"

"Just to be burnt with the body!"

"What else! Had we these five rupees earlier, we could have got some medicines for her."

Each had an inkling of what was on the other's mind. They went about the market from one cloth shop to another. They saw various kinds of cloth, silk and cotton, but could select nothing—until it became dark. Then, led by some mysterious power, they found themselves in front of a tavern and, as if the visit was predetermined, entered it.

For a while they stood undecided. Then Ghisu approached the counter and said, "Sahuji, a bottle for us too!"

This was followed by snacks and fried fish. The two of them sat in the veranda and went on drinking in peace. After several rounds in quick succession, they were in a state of exhilaration.

Ghisu spoke, "What use would have been a shroud? It would have been burnt after all. It could not possibly have accompanied her!"

Looking upwards at the sky—as if invoking the gods as witness to his innocence—Madhav said, "Such is the way of the world. Why otherwise would people give thousands

of rupees to Brahmins? Who knows whether it is repaid in the other world?"

"The rich have money, let them waste it! What have we to waste?"

"But what will you tell the people? Won't they ask, where is the shroud?"

Ghisu laughed. "We will tell them the rupees slipped down the waistband and got lost on the way. We searched hard but could not find them. People would not believe it, but will give 15 again all the same."

Madhav too laughed at this expected hick. He said, "She was a good soul, poor girl! Even in death she is feeding us."

More than half the bottle was now gone. Ghisu ordered two seers of *puris*, chutney, pickles and meat. The shop was just across the road. Madhav hurried there and brought back the delicacies on two leaf-plates. A whole rupee and a half was spent. They had only a few coppers left.

They sat and ate the *puris* in great style, like a lion feasting on its prey in a forest. No one to answer to, no dread of public censure. They had got over such scruples long ago.

Ghisu philosophised, "Having brought us such joy, will she not be blessed for it in the next world?"

Madhav reverently bowed his head in agreement. "Certainly she will be. O God, you know the hearts of all! Please take her to heaven. We bless her from the depth of our hearts. Such food we never had before!"

A moment later, Madhav had a doubt. He said, "We too shall go there one day, isn't it so, Dada?"

Ghisu made no reply to this naïve query. He did not want his present enjoyment to be disturbed by thoughts of the other world.

Madhav went on. Suppose she asks us there, "Why did you not give me a shroud?—What will you say?"

"Nonsense!"

"But ask she must!"

"How do you know she would not have a shroud? Do you take me for such a fool? Have I been wool-gathering all these sixty years? She shall have a shroud and a much better one at that!"

Madhav was unconvinced. "Who will give her?" he asked. "You have swallowed the money. It is me she will take to task, for it is I who put the vermilion on her head!"

Ghisu flared up. "I tell you she shall have a shroud! Why do not you take my word?"

"Why not say who will give it?"

"The very people who gave it now. May be, they won't put cash in our hands."

As it grew darker and the stars shone brighter, the tavern became livelier. One sang, one bragged, some hugged one another, or thrust glasses to their companions lips. The atmosphere was exhilarating, the air intoxicated. Some there were who got tipsy with the first round. More than the liquor it was the air that did it. Harassed by life they were drawn hither to forget for a while whether they were alive or dead or whether they existed at all.

And these two, father and son, continued to sip and be merry. All eyes were rivetted on them. How lucky to have a whole bottle to themselves!

Having had their fill, Madhav gave away the leftover *puris* on the leaf plate to a beggar who was standing and staring at them with hungry eyes. And for the first time in his life he felt the pride, glory and the thrill of "giving"

"Take it, have your fill and bless her," said Ghisu. She is dead to whom this is due. But your blessings will surely reach her. Let each hair of your body bless her. This is very hard-earned money.

Madhav again looked at the sky and said, "She will go to heaven, Dada. She will be queen in heaven."

Ghisu got up and as if floating on the waves of joy said, "Yes, my boy, she will go to heaven. She never harassed or bullied any one here. And dying she has not the biggest craving of our life. If she does not go to heaven, will these pot-bellied ones go who loot the poor right and left and bathe in the Ganges to wash away their sins and pour oblations in the temple?"

The mood of reverence underwent a swift change. Instability is the characteristic of intoxication. A fit of grief and despair overcame them.

Madhav said, "But the poor thing suffered a lot in her life Dada. How painful was her death!"

Covering his eyes with his hands he started weeping and wailing aloud.

Ghisu consoled him. "Why do you weep, my boy? Rather rejoice that she is freed from this web of illusion. Escaped from this tangle of misery. She is lucky to have broken loose so soon. From the bonds of *maya*."

The two stood up and began to sing:

*Why this witchery of the eyes,  
O false charmer!*

The eyes of all the topers were fixed on them, while the two went on singing, lost in themselves.

Then they began to dance. They bounced and jumped, reeled and wriggled, mimed and mimicked

And in the end they fell down—dead drunk.

*Translated from original Hindi by Madan Gopal*



## BONDED CHILD

*Kuvempu*

“**S**ubba! Subba! Eh Subba”

**S**A dark night in the rainy season. Darkness was dense. The whole world appeared to have been erased by darkness. It was a continuous torrential downpour. Heavy rain coupled with strong wind lashed sometimes.

The hills in the Malnad forest in the darkness seemed to have disappeared without any signs of their existence. When the wind blew hard, the whole forest appeared to be roaring. When it became light, the rain-drops fell on the trees, the areca nut and the plantain groves and on the tiles of the houses, making chutpat, turtur and pat-pat noise. As a result of the movement of the wind and the rain, thousands of frogs emerged from all directions, gabbling, causing disturbance. Along with them, some of the night-moving insects cried harshly from the hollow of the trees. The palm fronds caused a constant murmur and increased the noise all around. The sky was downcast. Sometimes, to unravel the mystery of the night, as if the day peeped in, the lightning flashed in the midst of the sky, like the tongue of a snake and disappeared. The universe

was replete with the sound of music, of darkness and the rain and water. All around the houses, the canals were flowing, roaring like the lions. Thunder rolled from one horizon to the other. Who would get sleep, in that weather of rain, storm, that continuous noise, that cold? All were asleep at home. Once the storm blew fiercely, it rained horribly, lightning too was terrible. Suddenly, a thunder bolt struck as if the universe collapsed and splintered like a dome of glass. Gowda woke up all of a sudden.

"Subba! Subba! Eh Subba!" he shouted.

Subba did not wake up. He had fallen asleep like a bent bow in the corner of an open verandah, covering himself with the torn blanket, donated by somebody. A young boy like him was tired after working in the fields for the whole day, along with the adults. He lay like a log, in the lap of the Goddess of Sleep, who is the mother of the orphans. Gowda got wild. He shouted several times. He could not hear his own voice in the midst of the rain and thunder, Yet, he shouted. He got up from the bed and came down from the verandah to take out a stick.

Gowda was the head of the family, very affluent. He was also the head of the entire village, but very hard-hearted. He was more than sixty, He had married thrice. He had lent money to four or five families on a high interest and destroyed them. Everyone was very much afraid of him, like being afraid of a tiger. Gowda mistook it as respect shown to him. He could not sleep without consuming brandy. But, he was no less orthodox. He used to smear his body with the holy ash. He worshipped Lord Shiva every day. While pouring brandy into the mug, he did not want that noise to be heard by the outsiders. So, he recited loudly, "Hari Narayana, Hari Narayana...." This Hari Narayana chanting was heard more during the rainy season.

Subba was a ten-year-old boy. His father Ranga was a tenant of Gowda. Subba's mother expired within two years

after his birth. Ranga tried his best to marry another girl. The marriage was fixed. But, the bride's party demanded Rs. 300 as bride price. Poor Ranga asked his master Gowda for a loan. Gowda drew his attention to the already pending loan of Rs. 300 with him and rejected his request outright. As such, Ranga's marriage was stalled. Within a few days, Ranga died of plague. Gowda in return of his loan, made Subba his bonded child-labourer and like the donkeys, made him carry a huge load, and the boy was also forced to carry out a heavy work. Whether Subba was capable or not, he had to carry out the assigned work. Gowda used to beat him with a stick now and then, in order to make him work. Subba became emaciated day-by-day. Even when he became sick, and lied down, Gowda would rain blows on his back and push him for the routine. The boy even while shivering due to feverish cold, attended to his work. Sometimes, other grown up servants, out of sheer pity for Subba, asked him to lie down and carried out his work themselves. But, on getting the clue of Gowda's coming, they would wake up Subba. Even in his feverish state, he would get up and take to his work. Thus, the poor orphan became nearer to the grave everyday.

When Gowda called Subba, he was asleep. He dreamt of pleasures that he could not enjoy. The desires that are not fulfilled in reality, are fulfilled in dreams. Subba dreamt of enjoying in a stately mansion, with his parents.

He wore different types of dresses, in his dream world. There was no need for him to do any work. There were many servants to attend to him and even friends to play with. He could eat varieties of sweets.

When Gowda beat him mercilessly with his stick, he got up screaming. When he opened his eyes in the lantern light, it was the horrible appearance of Gowda. Subba cast aside the blanket with which he had covered himself and got up entreating, "O generous master." Gowda chided him, "You rascal, even if I shout, you pretend to be asleep." Subba stood shedding tears, screaming with pain.

He could not understand anything but pain. Gowda, in a harsh tone, shouted, "Go, go over and look for the fishing net in the fields, and lifted his stick again." "Yes going..." cried Subba.

During the rainy season, when the fish are found in large numbers, the farmers catch fish with the fishing net. More than seven or eight basketful of fish can be caught per day. That day, Gowda felt that four or five basketful of fish would be available. At night times, he was anxious that either the fish would be spilt or be washed away in the flood of water. That was why he woke up the young boy by beating him.

Subba carrying a big basket left with a lantern in his hand. Gowda went back to have a sound sleep.

It was still pouring, there was also storm, thunder and lightning. Darkness was deep. The path was full of wet soil and it was slushy wherever Subba trod. He lifted the lantern high lest Gowda beat him for if the wet soil fell on the lantern. There were still five or six furlongs to reach the net. There was no other living being, except for the wild nature. On his way while jumping from one side of the field to the other end, he slipped in the mire and the lantern was broken. The light was put out. It was as if Subba was drowned in darkness. He sat sobbing on one end of the field, for breaking the lantern. He continued to weep, lest he might get severe punishment, if he returned home without collecting the fish. He sat out of fear in the darkness, trod a few steps in the midst of the storm and heavy downpour. In the lightning, he trod imagining the safe place to discover where the net lay. In that merciless and horrible situation of nature, he floated like a straw.

It became very cold. He covered himself with the blanket. He shivered, frightened on seeing something. At last, he reached the place where the net was.

Subba reached the net and put down the basket. He lifted it with great difficulty. The net had been filled with

the fish and they were producing 'chol chol' noise. Some of them were flying to the other side of the net. Subba lifted the net and kept it on the other side of and took out a funnel. Suddenly a snake that was in the net to swallow the fish, sprang up and bit Subba. By that time, the storm and the rain had subsided, to some extent. Subba screamed and collapsed as the poison had entered his body. Water was gushing through. The storm blew over the crops. The sky was shining with lightning. Without considering the routine, the wheel of the universe kept revolving.

At the dawn, Gowda was upset, as Subba had not returned. He searched for him assuming that he might have hidden somewhere in the house instead of going towards the field. He was not found anywhere and Gowda shouted with anger. He thought that Subba might have slept in somebody's house. At last he himself went in search of Subba, along with a labourer. On the way, he found a broken lantern at a corner of the field. It upset him all the more. "I shall break his bones, if I meet him." He roared. He went near the net. On looking at the net lying upside down, he lamented, "Alas, what a rascal? Chances of getting the fish are spoiled by him." He went still nearer. There was Subba lying in the mire, in the midst of the field. Gowda was shocked. He shouted at him, but there was no response. Subba neither got up nor moved. Gowda asked his companion to lift him up. He was lifted. Only the dead body stood mute.

Gowda felt very sad. "Three hundred rupees gone," he said with a sigh!

*Translated by M.S. Raghunath from the Kannada original, "Saalacla Magu,"  
Nanna Devaru Mattu Ithiara Kathegalu, 1938.*



## THE QUESTION OF THE HEAD

*Amin Kamil*

“**Y**ou would not understand these things. These are legal subtleties. It is a very sensitive issue. This is not an open-and-shut case,” he said indignantly. Then, he picked up a packet of cigarettes from the table, and I fell silent. He lit a cigarette. Leaning back in his chair, he blew a thick whiff of smoke in the air that faded out slowly, and gradually spreading across the entire room, and finally disappeared leaving behind its bad odour.

I was hushed, reflecting on why some people blow out smoke from their mouths and pollute the whole atmosphere around them, making it fetid. They live their own lives in comfort while they terrorize and oppress others, making life difficult for them. I was lost in these thoughts when he started again, “Listen! It is not about the body. The question is not of the body. The paramount issue is the head. What do I need its skin and flesh for? What I am concerned about is the direction of the head of the corpse. What matters is the head.” “That is the real issue,” he added forcefully. I too reflected on the importance of the

head. True, what value has man without the head ! I broke my silence, pulled myself together and asked.

"Do not you know, sir, in which direction the head was?"

"I know everything," he replied, gritting his teeth. "Do they fancy they can win the move by fraud? No ! I am not wet behind the ears. I am the old wily fox. I have not just completed college and been recruited as inspector by fleecing people here and there. I have been in the police service for 30 years now. Nobody can bamboozle me."

I agreed with what he said because it is true that one cannot dupe an old fox. And when one gets hooked between two wily foxes, one must prepare for one's funeral in advance. An old wily fox is shrewdness incarnate ! The harm that he causes cannot be reversed. The same thing has happened to the poor corpse which has been caught between two wily foxes.

I had heard the corpse mentioned casually, but I did not know the whole story. So I wanted to get to the bottom of the matter to end my curiosity. It was out of sheer curiosity that I asked him. Otherwise, I was no sarpanch who, after hearing the details, would settle the dispute ! Even if I had such intentions, seeing myself caught between two wily foxes, I would have taken to my heels. Only a super-giant would dare interfere between two giants.

So in order to understand the mystery better, I asked again, "You must have come to know about it a little later, or how else would the inspector of Khaampur have preempted you?"

He seemed to have been flattered by my words because he gave his neck a little twist, a smile bloomed on his lips and a strange evil sparkle glowed in his eyes but he contracted his brows into a frown and said, "This is entirely the fault of Constable Ama. Do you know him?"

"Yes of course, sir. I do know him." I replied without knowing that person.

"That idiot did not catch that man," he started. "He did not come in to inform me. Otherwise, I would have known the whole truth. Still, I have managed to get all the documents correct and ready."

"But who was that man, Sir?" I enquired further.

"I do not know. All because of this idiot of a constable!" He was furious, "They are not even good enough to deserve a charity, and here they get recruited as soldiers! Huh! They have no brains! They do not understand the sensitiveness of a matter. The idiot came in to tell me that the man had informed him about a corpse lying under a tree in Poshmarg. When I asked about the informer, he only knew that he was some horseman. O idiot! How could you let that person go! Who was he and where was he from? He could have been the murderer. Isn't that a possibility? A police inspector has to be very vigilant and have an eye on all the aspects of a case. Do not you think so?"

"Yes, Sir! You are right. An all famous inspector like you has to be very vigilant! Now what is the problem? Is there any hindrance in solving the case?"

"Hindrance?" He opened his eyes like an owl. With his left hand, he put his cap on the table and twisting his neck, said, "No *hindrance windrance*! I have played many such games before. All my documents are perfect. I will show that inspector of Khaampur who he is dealing with. Papers will talk." Having said that, he burst into laughter. I too felt like laughing but then I thought to myself, "He is enjoying some kind of game. Why should I get into it?" He took a soupcon of some sugary substance from a plate on the table and put it into his mouth and also invited me to have some, "Take it. This is a very delicious thing."

I too took a dash of it. It was sweet indeed. I thought he has become frank, let me egg him on. So I said, "Yes, but the inspector of Khaampur will not have peace without concocting some trick. He too must have planned something."

"Let him think. His brains will tire out soon. When did he know how to use his brains that he would do that now!" He straightened his arm and put his cap on. Yawning, he said, "He has done the mischief that he wanted to do. What else can he do now?"

"What mischief has he done, Sir?" I inquired foolishly.

"Yes, I will tell you." He gave his head such a jerk as if to reveal all. "As soon as I heard about the body found in Poshmarg, I immediately took my entourage with me to the spot. Since our police station has a large jurisdiction, it took us some time to reach there. When we reached the spot, I saw him there with a few of his constables. The body was lying under the Maple tree. But I understood all his shrewdness. How could he befool me! He cannot teach the grandmother how to suck an egg." He took another dash of the sugary substance and swallowed it.

I was curious to know why the two inspectors were after a single corpse. The case should have been handled by the one in whose jurisdiction the body was lying. That is why I asked, astonished, "So whose jurisdiction did the body fall in?"

"The body was in no one's jurisdiction. The body had been lying on the demarcation line between the jurisdictions of the two police stations. It was mandatory for both of us to reach the spot. I will not say that they should not have come. I cannot speak any such unreasonable thing." He craned his neck and looked out the window. A couple of policemen were beating someone on the roadside. I too had a clear view of it.

"But Sir, what was the matter exactly?" I asked naively, "One of you could have investigated the case!"

"What do you mean by 'one of you'?" he said mockingly.

"The case has to be investigated by the one in whose jurisdiction the head of the body was."

"But did you not just say that it was on the demarcation line?" I said.

"That is right! But the direction of the head of the body is yet to be decided!" he replied.

I was befuddled. I could not understand anything. He said something about the head earlier also but at that time I had not paid attention. So I asked, "But what has the head to do with this matter? What is the connection?"

"There is a connection. Definitely, there is one," he stressed. "Did I not tell you earlier that you will not understand these things? It is a legal point. If a body lies on the demarcation line, the body can be claimed by that police station only towards whose jurisdiction its head lies."

I asked quizzically, "So, in which direction was the head of the corpse?"

"There lies the mischief," he said, swinging his whole body, "This corpse dealer of Khaampur had already reached the spot. Rogue! I understand all their shrewdness. He had got the head of the body turned towards his jurisdiction, so that he could take the body into his custody. I am not a dim wit. I will not let him succeed in his devilish plan."

Now the whole matter was clear to me, but for one thing. That is why I asked him, "What did you do?"

"Do you think I would have allowed him to take the body into his custody? I got his stupid constables beaten up by my soldiers. If there is trouble, let there be. Papers will talk. Let the matter linger on." I began wondering if the

spectre of this body would start moving towards its home, but then a thought crossed my mind and I asked him, "But the corpse...won't it putrefy... after all, how long..." He did not let me finish my point, "Let it putrefy! The question is of the head. In what direction was the head? Unless that is resolved, the case will remain pending."

I fell silent.

*Translated by Ishrat Bashir from the Kashmiri original,  
"Sawaal Chhu Kaluk," Kathi Manz Kath, 1960.*



## BURGER

*Damodar Mauzo*

“**W**hat? You gave it to Sharmila!” Mummy exploded like a cracker. Close on its heels, the second one went off, “And she ate it?”

“So what? She is my friend.” Irene responded with conviction.

“My dear girl, she is a Hindu.”

“So what if she is a Hindu? Don’t I eat the pulao that she brings? We always share things with each other, Mummy,” Irene still spoke strongly.

“But my girl, Hindus do not eat beef. If her family comes to know that she ate a beef burger, they will certainly be upset. Sharmila and you will get a scolding from them.”

“But—” By now Irene was flustered, but keeping up her forceful attitude, she asked, “What is the problem if she eats a beef burger?”

“It is a sin.”

“It is a sin for her, but not for me?”

"The reason is that their God has told them not to eat beef." Mother explained to her.

"But have we not been taught that God is one?"

Now, her mother was irritated. "Do not preach to me. You can ask Daddy when he comes."

Irene was upset that by eating a beef burger, Sharmila had incurred a sin and that her parents would admonish her for it, but deciding to ask Daddy about it when he returned from work she began to do her homework. Opening her satchel, the first thing that caught her eye was the book. Sharmila had given it to her a couple of days ago. Sharmila loved to read. And her father, it seems, made it a point to bring good books for her to read. Irene too liked books, but she had not read much beyond Enid Blyton and the Harry Potter books. Last year, when she was in the Eighth standard, she discovered a love for reading, but of late, after her friendship with Sharmila, the direction of her reading had changed. First, Sharmila gave her Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist. The next small book was Dumas' The Three Musketeers. These were abridged versions. Irene learnt to differentiate between good books and books that were just okay. Of late, as soon as the interval bell went off, Irene and Sharmila would talk about nothing but books. Sharmila also loved to read Konkani books. Later she would recite Manohar Sardesai's poems to Irene. Because of Sharmila, Irene too began to read Konkani books. Engrossed in their discussion of books, recess seemed to get over in no time,

"Now you are in the Ninth. Next year you will be in the SSC class. You can not waste your time reading unimportant books. If you want a good percentage at the public exam, you have to concentrate right away," Mummy would admonish her, but Irene was not worried. Ever since she became friends with Sharmila, she had started scoring even better marks. Irene was good in maths. If she

had to get even a couple of marks less than cent per cent, she would get irritated. Sharmila was very good in both English and Konkani. Now, with the influence of Irene, her mathematics had improved. And because of Sharmila, Irene started doing better in languages. The friendship was going so well—why did *this* have to come between them now?

They were taken to Cabo de Rama for the school picnic. The fort reminded them of *Castle Stories* which they read in their childhood. It was fun. At noon, as they became hungry, all the children took out their lunch packs and began to eat. Irene sat down with Sharmila in the shade of a tamarind tree. Sharmila insisted on sharing with Irene, the pulao prepared by her mother and Sharmila asked Irene, "What have you brought? It smells good!" Irene had immediately placed a burger on Sharmila's plate. By way of formality, Sharmila had said "No, you have it." To which Irene had promptly replied, "Do not worry. Go ahead and eat it—I have brought two."

At that time, Irene had never imagined that it would lead to this! She had not done it intentionally—but it was a sin nonetheless. What if Sharmila gets a scolding...

Just then Daddy appeared. But before Irene could ask him, Mummy told him everything.

"Daddy, I did not know that Hindus do not eat beef," Irene muttered in a small voice.

"But she knew it, did she not? Why did she eat it then?"

Indeed Daddy was right! Why did Sharmila eat that burger?

"You told her it was a beef burger, did you not?"

When Daddy asked her, Irene responded in a tear-stained voice, "No, Daddy. I only said 'burger'. It is my fault."

"The fault was on both sides. Never mind. Now do not go telling her that it was of beef."

Irene was not satisfied with Daddy's words. "Will her father scold her if he comes to know?"

"He will come to know only if you tell, won't he?"

"And Daddy, now that she has eaten beef, will she incur a sin? Then she won't even talk to me."

Butterflies began to flutter in her stomach. What an enjoyable day it was at the picnic. Because of a small fault on my part, Sharmila will have to pay the price.

Irene was prone to dreams. Today's dream was more frightful than usual: *Sharmila's father and mother were both giving her a severe dressing down. Outside, it was thundering and raining. Sharmila was kneeling before them, crying and begging for forgiveness—“I am sorry! Please forgive me. Irene deceived me so I ate it. From now on I will never ever eat beef again... I will break the friendship with Irene. I will never talk to her again... never again.” A flash of lightning was followed by a deafening thunderclap... Irene's eyes were blinded and her ears blocked by the thunder. Where could the thunderbolt have fallen? On Sharmila? Where is Sharmila? She woke up with a start and found herself drenched in sweat.*

The storm in her mind was still raging. Perhaps Mummy and Daddy had forgotten the topic. Irene decided to behave as if nothing had happened. Today had been declared a holiday because of yesterday's picnic and tomorrow was Sunday. Now, she would have to face Sharmila only on Monday. She was just thinking of this when her mobile phone rang. She heard it ring and immediately knew who it was, but she did not have the guts to take the call. It kept ringing. With every ring, Irene's heart began to thud—soon her chest was heaving.

"Your phone is ringing my girl, take the call," Mummy said to her. Irene cut the call. She was just letting out a sigh when the phone rang again. Before mother could say

anything Irene cut it and promptly switched the phone off. In any case who but Sharmila would phone her?

Since Irene loved burgers for breakfast, Mummy warmed yesterday's remaining burgers in the oven and placed it in front of her. Irene pushed the plate far away from her so as not to even glance at them. She picked up a slice of bread from the table, dipped it in her tea, and began to nibble at it. And before Mummy could ask her anything, she gulped down her tea and sat with her books.

She had to return the book lent by Sharmila. I wonder if Sharmila will talk to me now. But then how will I return the book? Never mind, returning the book will give us an excuse to talk. And if she talks to me I will ask for her forgiveness. Sharmila was not a person who would harbour a grudge, but what if her parents pressurize her? I knew she was a Hindu, but we were so close to each other, that I never felt she was different from me. Nobody ever told me that it would be a sin for her if she ate what I ate. And if anybody had told me this, would I have believed it? If she did not like the burger, I could understand it, but Sharmila relished the burger so much that she kept praising it. I told mummy that she enjoyed eating the burger. Sharmila too must have told her mother. She must have asked what burger it was? I wonder what Sharmila told her? And what if her mother came to know! Her father was very fond of Sharmila. But would he keep quiet if he knew that she had incurred this sin? How would he punish Sharmila?

"What has got into you, my dear? This morning you did not have the burger. Now you do not seem to want any lunch!"

Just to please her mother, Irene ate a little. Just then, Daddy returned for lunch, it being a half-day. Mummy immediately told him, "Because yesterday she gave beef to her Hindu friend, today Irene is moping."

Daddy laughed. "Never mind. Irene, since you have defiled her, now we will have to find her a nice Catholic groom and marry her off!"

Irene could not fathom whether her father was serious or just pulling her leg. She thought of asking him directly, but instead got up and silently went inside.

So I have defiled Sharmila. But what did I actually do? The word defile has a stink to it. To say that I have defiled her, means that I have spoiled her. Daddy says that we have to find a Catholic groom and marry her off. As if we can do this? Marriage has to be a question of one's own choice. Daddy himself says that the days of parents searching for partners for their children are over. And in books too we read the same thing. Poor Sharmila! I hope nothing bad happens to her.

In the evening, Irene dressed up to go out. "Where are you going, Irene?" Mummy asked in surprise, intuitively adding, "To your friend's house?"

"I am going for Mass, mummy." The Saturday evening Mass was kept for those who can not make it for the Sunday Obligation Mass. Irene set out for this service as the church is generally not crowded.

Composing herself as best as she could, Irene took part in the Mass. Waiting for the church to empty, she followed the Parish Priest into the sacristy. Mercifully no one else was there. "Father I want to make a confession."

Regarding her with mild surprise for a while, the priest nodded his head in assent. "Come."

The priest put the stole around his neck and sat down. Irene got up, knelt before him and making a sign of the cross she said, "Bless me Father for I have sinned."

"When did you last make your confession, my girl?"

Irene answered him and went on, "Father, yesterday I committed a sin."

"Go on. Have faith in God and open your heart. You will receive His forgiveness."

Irene was strengthened by the supportive words of the priest.

"Yesterday, we had gone on our school picnic. My friend Sharmila was with me. We sat together to have our lunch. I gave her my beef burger and she ate it. I did not know that Hindus do not eat beef. I made a mistake. Forgive me Father."

A smile creased the priest's face. "Is that all? Do not worry, It is a venial sin. You have asked for forgiveness. Your heart is now clean."

"But Father, it is a sin for her and because of me."

Father interrupted her and asked her to say her penance. "Do not you worry my child, everything will be sorted out." Saying a prayer and giving her the final blessing, he said, "God has forgiven you. Go into the peace of the Lord," and he stood up.

But how? God may have forgiven me. But will her parents forgive her? And will God forgive her? She turned towards home with these thoughts troubling her. Deep in the night, it came back—

*This time, Irene was kneeling before Sharmila begging for forgiveness. Sharmila was shoving her away, "You commit the fault and I have to pay the penalty? Look at this?" she said pointing to the welts on her back, arms and her legs. "So sorry, Sharmila. Who beat you? You poor girl... I deserved the beating." Just then, somebody shouted, "Do not think that you will escape the thrashing." A big, hefty man with bulging red eyes was standing and glaring at her. Probably Sharmila's father. "So, you are the one who defiled her, did you not?" "No, no, Sir", "Yes you did,—you did It!..." and he raised the stick in his hands. Irene tried to stifle the scream in her throat but...*

"What happened my dear? You had a nightmare?" Mummy drew her close and hugged her. Irene began to cry. "Do not be silly. You had a bad dream, but it's over. Get up, drink some water and go back to sleep."

She kept her phone off on Sunday too. What would she reply if Sharmila asked her? She would ask for forgiveness when they met in school tomorrow. And what if she comes here? And with her parents? What if they fight with my mum and dad? It would be better if I go and spend the day with Aunt Celina. But that would leave mummy and daddy to face Sharmila's parents. Let it be. That night, she slept close to her mother. Perhaps because her mother's arm was protectively around her, the nightmare stayed away. But she did not get a good sleep either.

She reached school early and tried to make herself invisible till assembly time. She guessed that Sharmila would be looking for her, so she kept her gaze away lest their eyes should meet. After assembly, she kept talking to Sandra and walking on. Pretending not to have heard Sharmila calling out to her, she entered the class. But, by the time she sat down, Sharmila came running out to her, "Irene, where were you yesterday and the day before? I rang up so many times. And what is this? Your eyes look like you have had a late night. Okay, okay, I know. Once you start on a book, you do not feel like putting it down. What time did you get to sleep last night? Did you finish it?" Before Irene could open her mouth to mutter an answer, the teacher entered the class and Sharmila went back to her place and sat down.

Thank God the subject of the burger did not come up! That means, there was no noise about it at Sharmila's place. Relieved, Irene opened her exercise book.

At interval, before Irene could get up, Sharmila came up to her. Grabbing her hand she said, "Come. I have to ask you something," and she pulled her.

"Tell me this. That burger..."

Irene's heart skipped a beat.

"Did your mummy make it?"

Irene did not know what to answer. Not used to telling lies she said, "Yes."

"How are they made?"

There seemed to be anxiety in Sharmila's voice. Perhaps her mother suspected it and had asked her to probe tactfully.

"I have no idea how she makes them."

"Okay I will phone you later. Please ask your mummy and tell me. I have told my mother to make a similar burger for me. You can not imagine how much I enjoyed it? Wow, Yummy!"

And right enough, she phoned in the evening. Despite not being used to telling lies, Irene told one now... "Sorry, mummy's gone out, but I had asked her. She said that similar ones are available at any pastry shop."

"I know that you get burgers in the shop. But what are the burgers, that your mummy made, called?"

Irene was in a quandary but she had to play for time, "I really do not know. Go to one of the shops and give it a try?"

The following day, she returned the book and forestalling Sharmila from talking about the burger, Irene went on talking about books. "Daddy asked me what I was reading. I told him *Pride and Prejudice*. Daddy was surprised and said, 'Show me the book.' I showed him and he was pleased, 'Good! You should read books like this.' Then he told me, 'This is an abridged and easy-reading version.' He then told me to read the full novel when I was older."

"Yes. My father too says the same thing. We have read Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* haven't we? There are many such books. He is going to get more of them for me."

They must have not come to know anything at Sharmila's house. True. But Irene's feelings of guilt were undiminished. Whether she is aware or not, Sharmila has committed the sin. But is it a sin if she does not know about it? What if she comes to know in a few days' time?

That day, when Irene broached the subject, mummy's advice was—

"Stay away from your friend. If the issue flares up in their family one of these days you will be held responsible. Better if you get used to distancing yourself from her."

Irene did not like mummy's counsel. But she understood the practicality of it. From then on she avoided Sharmila. Whenever Sharmila came close to her, Irene pretended to be engrossed in conversation with someone else. And she was especially careful to steer clear of her during snack time. But it was not very easy to stay away from Sharmila. They had grown so close during the past year that she could not bear this distance.

Next day, just as Irene was eating from her tiffin box, Sharmila began to approach her. Seeing her coming, Irene hurriedly popped the last beef croquet into her mouth, whole.

"You greedy lump—eat decently, do not gobble it! See what my mother has made—Cucumber cake!" And she promptly deposited a slice in Irene's tiffin box. Irene could not fathom why her eyes began to brim as she ate the sweet.

Next morning at school, Sharmila came running to Irene. "I have a surprise for you today. Let's meet during the interval."

Must be some good news. But Irene was so anxious to know that she could not wait for recess. As soon as the first period ended, Irene went to Sharmila's desk, "Tell me, what is the surprise?"

Sharmila flashed open her bag—*Animal Farm* was right on top. By which time the teacher entered the class. Irene rushed back to her place. Sharmila had been talking about the book for the last few days. It seems it was a story of different animals living together in a farm. It is a satire on humans who live together, fight each other, pull one another down and live in rivalry with each other. Irene felt like reading it.

During the break, Sharmila took her by the hand and dragged her outside—"Surprise!"

"*Animal Farm*?"

"No, my dear! Burger! Just like the one your Mummy made!" and she opened the box.

"There is a pastry shop close to our house. Because I asked for it, papa brought a burger for me the day before yesterday. I told him—that wasn't the one I wanted—the one Irene brought was quite different. He said that it was probably a beef burger. He then brought *these* burgers. And they tasted almost the same as the ones that you had brought. See, I have brought two—one for me and one for you."

Irene was stunned! Gathering up her wits, she asked, "You guys eat beef burgers at home?"

"Of course! Grandma does not, but the rest of us relish them."

*Translated by Xavier Cota from the Konkani original  
"Burger," Jaag, July, 2015.*



# THE SCIENCE OF WORDS

*Gajendra Thakur*

The sun is in the fifth sign of the zodiac, which falls between the 16th of August and the 16th of September. If you want to dry something then it is the best time to do so, since during this period sunlight is the most intense and hot.

During this period the palm leaves remain under the sun, a part of Milu's fathers annual preservation plan, to instill life into these palm leaves. Ananda used to help in preserving these palm leaves. She would carefully place them where they would get the maximum heat, Milu remembered vividly. Ananda's life was mostly spent with Milu. But before the onset of this year's fifth sign of Leo, of the Sun-zodiac, Ananda has departed... and now in her absence how will the preservation of life be possible, the lives of both Milu and these palm-leaf inscriptions...

Fallacy, the fallacy of words. We ascribe our personal emotions to words and after that confusion begins.

*In the courtyard of Lukesari there is a tree of sandalwood.  
Beneath that the cuckoos clamour.*

*I will cut the sandalwood tree and will encircle the courtyard.*

*Cuckoo, your clamouring will end  
The cuckoo of the jungle began crying  
The cuckoos' clamour stopped  
Oh! cuckoos, cuckoos of youthfulness, do not cry  
Clamour cuckoo, clamour  
Whichever jungle you go to  
Your marks would remain there  
Tears do not come out of eyes  
I will wrap both your wings with gold, o cuckoo  
I will wrap both your lips with silver  
O my cuckoo dear, whichever jungle you go to  
The marks of 'a garland of blood' would remain*

Some one seemed to be singing in the tanners' quarters of the village... it was Ananda's voice.

But Ananda was dead, she died only a few hours ago! Bachlu had seen her dead body. After informing Milu, he returned to the village quarters. Ananda had died when she was quite old. But the voice that was heard was of a young Ananda...

It may be a fallacy, fallacy of words. Srikar Mimamsak, Milu's father, used to say so many things about the 'science of words'. We ascribe meaning to the words and then the confusion begins...

## I

### There was a tumult.

The turmoil began. In the river Bataan, a corpse was found floating. Besides the washerman's quay, the corpse had got stuck on the edge.

Nobody knew from where it had come. It was a dead body of an old woman. But the washerwoman recognised it. She informed Bachlu, who in turn gave the news to the

dead woman's family. Only an old man lived in that house, the house of Milu. People brought the dead body to the village. Milu performed the last rites.

In the village, this incident became a hot topic of discussion. The old Bachlu knew something more. He knew who the dead woman was. The new generation did not know all these things...

The dead body of Ananda was consigned to the flames...

Ananda was kind, she understood things quickly. Her daughters were married into well-to-do families. Her son was educated. Milu, Ananda's husband, son of Srikan Mimamsak, was also highly educated. Never had they asked anything from anybody, even in times of need.

Bachlu was also old... In this village only Milu was older than him. The people regarded these two as "old men".

Old man Bachlu knew many things....

Discussions between Milu and Srikan were common. Sometimes I understood and sometimes I did not....

"Milu, in *Bhamati*, Vachaspati says that the base of ignorance of living becomes the subject. Which method will you adopt for self-introspection? How can the untruth be the cause for something? The existence of something, how can this fact, prove something as true; and how can it prove its existence in three ages? That which is neither true nor false; and which is also not both, only that is unspeakable. Without any subject and the knower of that subject, how can the concept of zero be explained?"

"Milu, Kumarila says that the *atman* (soul) is living inertia. During the awakened stage, it cognises and during sleep, it is without knowledge."

"Milu, Vachaspati says in *Bhamati* that a person, who is an expert in a science that is without self-introspection behaves with society in the same way as an animal behaves with it. He flees on seeing a person coming holding a stick;

and if he sees someone coming with a basket of food, then he goes near him. It means that he fears fear."

...

It was the season of mango fruits.

Monkeys leaped from tree to tree and nilgais and bison trampled vegetables growing in the fields behind houses in the village.

"Everything has been destroyed, Bachlu, I will go to the orchard in the morning. The nilgais have already destroyed a lot of fruits and crops, now these monkeys are after the mangoes."

I did remember that during the mango season monkeys and nilgais had a great feast every year.

It was the mango season, So Milu would have to begin guarding the mango orchard. The flowers had just begun turning into fruits. Milu had to construct a loft, I also helped him. We were just returning after cutting the bamboos. It was early in the morning. The red in the sky had a yellowish hue. Near the small pond, I saw Bachlu...

I began to come forward through the pathway in the field. Then I saw some blood. I became nervous after seeing the blood.

But I relaxed soon. I then saw the sharp leaves of bamboo had bruised the girl's hand.

The girl had tears in her eyes. Milu cleaned the blood and put some damp soil onto her bruises.

"What are you doing?"

"The flow of blood will stop, it will stop bleeding now"

The girl had run through the fields. "What is your name?" "Ananda".

"Which village have you come from?"

"From this village."

"From this village?" Both of us exclaimed together.

Yes, Ananda was her name. And it was their first meeting, of Milu and Ananda.

The loft in mango orchard was constructed. But Ananda was not to be seen after that,

Milu often asked about her.

"To which quarter of the village does she belong? She is neither from that of the Mishras, nor from the Westerners or the Thakurs," he kept thinking.

If she had been from the quarter of scavengers, then I would have known her.

Then how could she be from our village? And if she is from our village then why have we not met her till now?

But in between these events, a coincidence occurred. In Milu's quarter, an investiture ceremony of Phude's son was held. On that auspicious day, I had gone outside the village to the tanner's quarters to cut bamboo. I also had to call the men who would play the pipes.

I heard someone call me.

"Hirua brother, O Hirua brother".

"He is coming". A woman's voice was heard. The voice seemed familiar to me.

"Who are you?"

"I am Hirua's daughter. What do you want?"

"Your father did not come for the bamboo cutting ceremony, they miss the times of his pipe there. I have come here to call him."

"He is preparing for that occasion".

"What is your name?"

At that very moment a girl came outside pushing aside the creepers hanging from the bamboo fencing of their house.

"I am Ananda. I recognised you. What is your name?" I was feeling cold. But I had to answer.

"Bachlu."

"And your friend's name?"

"Milu, son of Pandit Srikara."

I told Milu's father's name to Ananda, although she did not ask for it. Not knowing why, I told her.

At that moment Hirua came out with his pipe. I accompanied him to Milu's quarter of the village. On the way, I asked Hirua, "Ananda is your daughter, but I have never seen her?"

"She has lived most of the time at her maternal uncle's place. But now she has come of age. So I brought her to the village."

"When will she go back to her uncle's place?"

"No! Now she is of marriageable age. She will remain with us,"

Milu, my friend, had been asking a lot about her. I kept thinking how he would react after hearing the news of her marriage. I wished that Ananda would go back to her maternal uncle's village and then I would be free from Milu's repeated enquiries.

But now since Ananda would remain in the same village as Pandit Srikar's son Milu, what would he do?

Oh! But I was myself thinking out of context. Milu had asked about Ananda in a natural way. That does not mean that...but does it mean...? So?

The son of a Brahmin and the daughter of a tanner...

Will Pandit Srikar approve of this relationship? Will the villagers approve of this relationship?

Oh... I was again thinking out of context. I could hear the pipe blowing. Men and women moved towards the bamboo plantation, through the field. Milu and

I accompanied them. On the way I tried to locate that place. The place where Milu and Ananda had first met... we could hear a faint voice... a beautiful musical sound.... The boy, whose investiture ceremony was going on, had marked the bamboos. The bamboos now had to be cut. Construction of the sacred loft in the courtyard had to be completed today as it was an auspicious day. After much labour and sweat, we finally completed the work and only then was my mind at peace. After that Milu and I started walking through the fields.

But Milu started asking me questions about Ananda again. He was my Lord Rama and I was his follower, Hanuman.

Sitting on the loft in the orchard one day I told him, "Milu, please forget her. Why are you abetting her to a bad name? Ananda is Hirua's daughter. Although she asked only your name, I told her both yours and your father's name too".

"She asked for my father's name?"

"No, but..."

"Then why did you tell her my father's name?"

"One day she would have come to know..."

"I would have faced that day... but now she will ignore me... now I have to put in some extra effort."

"What effort? You are the son of Srikar, a Brahmin and she is the daughter of Hirua, the tanner. Why are you intent upon giving her a bad name?"

"I will marry her; why should I give her a bad name?"

"Who are you deceiving?"

"I am deceiving nobody, dear friend."

Milu took decisions impulsively. He was Pandit Srikar's son. Srikar was an exponent of the Mimamsa school of Indian Philosophy. I had seen the palm-leaf inscriptions

lying everywhere in his house; so I did not believe my friend.

"I have never seen her in the village."

"You never stay in the village for long. You returned only last year from the school of your teacher."

"But even you had never seen her,"

"She has been living at her maternal uncle's village."

"Will she go back to her uncle's village again?"

"No, I had enquired about that. She will now remain in this village."

Last year, Milu's mother passed away.

Srikar Mimamsak became almost lost his mind of the shock. The village people were worried: who would look after the preservation of palm leaves during this year's Leo zodiac of the sun? Srikar had been grappling with this anxiety and so he went almost crazy...it was being discussed by the people of his quarter of village.

*Hirr... hirr... hirr...*

From my part of the village, Domsai, Milu and I were shouting hirr... hirr following the pigs. We reached the tanner's quarters in the village. Ananda, however, met us midway. I moved forward along with the pigs. After a while I turned my head around to overhear the talk between Ananda and Milu.

*Hirr... hirr*

This time Ananda shouted "hirr" and I smiled and moved further along with the pigs.

This went on for quite some time. Hirua was agitated and came to me several times, Hirua's wife began praying for her daughter.

*How distant is the temple of the Goddess  
 How far is the temple of Lukesari  
 Many miles I went for appeal  
 Goddess, look into me.*  
*Many miles I went for appeal  
 Goddess, look unto me.*  
*Four miles is the temple of the Goddess  
 Eight miles is the temple of Lukesari  
 Ten miles I went for appeal  
 Goddess, look unto me*  
*Which flower for the temple of Goddess?  
 Which flower for the temple of Goddess Bandi?  
 Which flower for my chosen appeal?  
 Goddess, look unto me*  
*Which flower for my chosen appeal?  
 Goddess, look unto me*  
*This flower for the temple of Goddess  
 That jasmine flower for the temple of Lukesari  
 Marigold flower I chose for appeal  
 Goddess, look unto me*  
*Marigold flower I chose for appeal  
 Goddess, look unto me*

Hirua came to Domasi, the village quarter of the scavengers.  
 "What will happen? How will it happen?"

"All false..."

"I promised him that I would accompany him to Srikar Pandit."

And I did accompany him one day to Srikar Mimamsak.  
 "Srikar's wife died soon after the Leo zodiac of the Sun.  
 After that Mimamsak became crazy... people say" I said to him on the way.

"Which people? Those people who were from his quarter of the village? The people of the village and the

learned people of the area respected him. I am telling you what I have seen with my eyes..."

Talking thus, we reached Pandit Srikar's house.

"Come Bachlu, Hirua, come and sit down," saying this, Srikar relapsed into silence. After the death of his wife, he had become like this. He seemed normal but suddenly be lost in silence.

"Uncle, the courtyard of your house is empty. How long will you let it remain so? Why do you not get your son Milu married?"

"Milu has already made his decision about his marriage."

"When and where?" I became agitated. Hirua seemed to look at me with relieved eyes.

"He has decided to marry Ananda. Her father has come with you."

Oh... And Srikar Pandit was that type!

And Milu was of that type too! He has already hypnotised his father. But a person from Srikar's quarter of the village overheard this talk.

We all were seated when that person came to Srikar's house, accompanied by some other people. An argument ensued among Pandit Srikar and these people. The opposite argument, word for word, also ensued.

"Srikar, what type of demeanour is this?"

"Which type of demeanour?"

"You do not have any sense in distinguishing high and low, Mimamsak?"

"Dear learned folks! What is this high and low differentiation?"

"That means that high and low are only meanings of words? And the analysis that we have done after making it a sentence is selfishness?"

"If you do not believe then surrender the selfish content from the sentence. All fallacy would be falsified."

"Does this mean you are hell bent upon carrying out the marriage between Milu and Ananda?"

"Dear learned folks! You confuse snake for rope because both have separate existence. If you squeeze your eyes shut, then you would see two moons; then you place moons in two real places of the sky. The reason for fallacy is not the subject but the attachment, although both purpose and result are true. And here also the knowledge of all subjects cannot give Knowledge of the Self. One's nature is described by Knowledge of Self through the concept of Self. Self is subject and object both, of knowledge. The Knowledge of Self is both subject and object. The meaning of Substance is obtained through attachment. The meaning of a word is near its inference after we hear a word."

"You are creating a fallacy of words. We all see that you are determined to get them married."

"When desire does not get fulfilled, then it is envy" Pandit Srikar commented.

"Do you think that all this that we are saying is out of envy? Do not you give any value to caste?"

"See, Ananda is full of good qualities. My caste and her's are the same; and that is the truth known to all. She will be able to preserve my legacy that I believe in. And that is my decision."

"And that is my decision"—these words did not enter my and Hirua's ears. I had known Srikar and Milu for a long time. But this type of unexpected decision I was not accustomed to. Hirua realised what these words meant after some time. He was amazed when he turned and looked towards me.

Then Srikar Mimamsak pointed a finger towards one person, an astrologer.

"Jyotishiji, you select one auspicious day. In this season this holy marriage should be held, preferably before the arrival of Leo Zodiac of the Sun. Anyone of you have any objection?"

All stood on their feet with bowed heads. Who would dare to oppose Srikar Mimamsak?

"All of us came here to discuss. But if you have already taken a decision then there remains nothing to oppose."

Mimamsak raised his hand and all became silent.

I and Hirua moved slowly away from there.

Hirua took such a deep breath that I could feel it.

It was not that any other obstruction did not come.

But that crazy Srikar Mimamsak was a scholar of repute. Ananda became his daughter-in-law. She was accepted not only in Milu's quarter of the village but also among all the scholars in the vicinity.

In Ananda's father's house the marriage ceremony was organised. I heard the songs full of life, I still remember them:

*The black bee that slept over the hill  
 Gardener-daughter sleeping in garden  
 Get up gardener-daughter, keep the garland  
 The black bee that slept over the hill  
 Gardener-daughter slept in the garden  
 Get up gardener-daughter, keep the garland.  
 With what flower I would cover Goddess Lukesari  
 With what I would make her clothes  
 With what flower I will knot to make it an ornament  
 Get up gardener-daughter, place the garland  
 With Arabian jasmine flower I will cover Bandi  
 With Spanish jasmine I will clothe her  
 China rose would be the ornament of Lukesari*

*Get up gardener-daughter, thread the garland  
 Get up gardener-daughter, thread the garland*

Srikan Mimamsak became more composed after assigning the task of preserving the palm leaf inscriptions to Ananda. After his wife's death, the poor man was really apprehensive regarding that important work of his.

Ananda's role in preserving these palm leaves seemed like a divine interference. In a sudden turn of events Milu told me how he had convinced Srikan Pandit about this marriage. The daughter of a Brahmin would be busy cleaning utensils and Pooja materials; she would be busy making an earthen image of the Lord Shiva; and by then the palm leaves would get damaged.

He could not allow these palm leaves to be destroyed; Ananda had to get married to his son and come to his house, Srikan Mimamsak had decided.

Milu was grateful for his decision.

Srikan had aged. Srikan and Ananda were still very much active in holding their philosophical discussions.

Ananda sang:

*When twelve years passed the thirteenth arrived  
 Folks, my mother-in-law calls me a tigress  
 She would banish the tigress from her house.  
 Outside the courtyard of yours is standing the  
 moneylender  
 Folks, give me some Madar and Thorn-apple, I will grind  
 and drink it  
 The beloved has come from afar and sits on the bedstead  
 Folks, tell me the thoughts of your heart; after that I will  
 drink poison  
 When twelve years passed and the thirteenth arrived  
 Folks, mother-in-law calls me a tigress  
 I will banish the tigress from home.*

*My mother-in-law beats me, my sister-in-law beats me  
 Folks, these will go and all the wealth would be mine  
 Keep silence; keep silence proud women you are great,  
 proud women  
 Poud women, I will perform holy-basil-plant oblation  
 And I will squander all my wealth.*

Srikar Mimamsak would jokingly ask, "Ananda, you do not have a mother-in-law, then can you say that she is calling you a tigress?"

"Therefore I am singing, everything I have, but..."

While speaking Ananda's eyes were full of tears. I still remember this.

"I caused you pain by saying this."

"What pain? I do not have a mother-in-law but I do have a father-in-law."

Seeing Srikar happy, Milu always felt satisfied.

Even after Srikar Mimamsak's death, Ananda continued to instill life into these palm leaves.

In due course, Milu had two daughters, Vallabha and Medha.

I had seen joy on Ananda's face. She had gone to her mother's place, where she gave birth to the twins.

*You Red Fairy. O Pink fairy  
 O Over the sky would dance the Indra Fairy  
 O On the rose would dance the Indra Fairy*

...

In due course, he had a son. When his son Megha grew up, Milu sent him to Benaras for studying.

The days passed, his daughters grew up and both Medha and Vallabha were married. Milu experienced enormous satisfaction and peace.

His son's marriage was also performed in the meantime. Megha began teaching in Benaras. Megha, Medha and Vallabha all three came to the village at least once in a year.

People forgot many things about them.

## 2

### The stage of Bhamati.

Ananda was busy preserving the palm leaves of Milu's father; even in the intense heat, Milu still remembers.

Ananda's whole life was spent with Milu and when she was no more there how was Milu going to survive?... Milu did not listen to the holy *Garud Purana*. When he felt like listening to something Milu liked to listen to Mandana's *Brahmasiddhi* and Vachaspati's *Bhamati*. If his daughters insisted, then he would listen to Kumarila's philosophy on the subject of the Self.

Srikanth often spoke many things about the science of words and on the philosophical writings of Bhamati. We ascribe too much of meaning to words and then begins the confusion.

"Teacher, after my wife's death I am in distress. Where will Ananda be?"

"Milu, be composed. This lesson of *Brahmasiddhi* will remove all your illusions. In *Brahmasiddhi* there are four divisions—Brahman, Logic, Command and Accomplishment. In Brahman division, the discussion is on forms of Brahma; in Logic division it is on proof; in Command division it is on the liberation of a living being and in Accomplishment part, there is discussion on the proof of Upanishadic thoughts."

"Milu, there is no subject apart from Liberated Knowledge. Liberation is Knowledge itself. Mandana gives value to the mean knowledge of Man's intellect. He values work. But these alone are not enough for liberation. The sound-word was given a meaning through the explosion that Mandana saw. So he is different from Shankara in a way that he identifies this explosion and gives identity to it; but Shankara does not believe in any identity less than that of Brahma. So Mandana is a purer non-dualist than Shankara."

"Milu, Mandana does not believe in 'able' and 'not-able' as mutually opposed. This sometime means action based difference; but that difference will not become an original element. So that Bahman would remain as it is in all the differences and still would do every work."

"Look at the Bhamati stage of Vachaspati and the philosophy of Mandana, they are in coherence. On *Brahmasiddhi* of Mandana Mishra, Vachaspati has written an elucidation called *Epistemology Critique*, although that work is now not available".

"Then how did the epistemology critique come forward?"

"In Bhamati of Vachaspati, there is a discussion about it."

"But, before delving deeper into Mandana, I wonder how can one benefit from his theories especially after he had lost his debate with Shankaracharya. Also I wonder how can anyone get peace from defeated theories?"

"See, Mandana was defeated, the evidence of this is not available in the writings of Mandana. Mandana's philosophy of language was opposed by Shankaracharya."

"That is right. If Mandana had lost he would have followed Shankaracharya."

"Now tell me. Sureshvaracharya, who was appointed as head of Sringeri Math by Shankaracharya, says that

ignorance is not of two types; but Mandana mentions two types of ignorance in *Brahmasiddhi* as non-acceptance and wrong-acceptance. Mandana opposes Shankaracharya but Sureshvaracharya follows him."

...

Monkeys and nilgais are tearing down the fruit trees and the male buffaloes are trampling the cultivated land behind the houses. Now, for my sake the village people would not stop rearing buffaloes.

"Four monkeys are in the orchard and they are damaging the mangoes. I had gone there. In the evening, all the monkeys were perched on top of the trees. Till evening we, father and son duo, took care of the orchard. The monkeys fled when we threw wooden missiles, but then they went towards your orchard."

"Everything has been damaged, Milu. At night they are not able to see. In the morning I will go to the orchard. The nilgais have also damaged a lot. And now these monkeys are after mangoes. Let them damage when..."

"The nilgais were completely gone from our area for some time. How have they resurfaced? They must have crossed the river from the next village during night..."

"I do not think that is true. These nilgais have come from the Nepal side during the floods. Let them come when..."

"I told you about the monkeys."

"That would be done."

"All right, brother, then I am going."

I remember the year, when Ananda and Milu met for the first time, when during the month of mangoes, the monkeys and nilgais had suddenly disappeared. Now when Ananda has departed, these monkeys and nilgais

have resurfaced from nowhere. Not even 15 days have passed since Ananda's death...

Bachlu left the place and on Milu's forehead thick lines of anxiety began moving, one towards the another like waves do, interfering mutually, the old waves turning into new waves and moving forward. He called his daughters, his voice reaching across the courtyard.

"Daughters! Jayakar and Vishwanath had gone to the orchard today; have they both returned or not? I heard that the monkeys are up to mischief there. From tomorrow Jayakar and Vishwanath will not go to the orchard, tell them. Today monkeys came to the orchard, you did not tell me this. What should I do after hearing this when..."

"I did tell you, father, but these days you remain immersed in your own thoughts. Then I got tired of repeating it, so I stopped."

Yes, nowadays Milu was lost in his own world. The mangoes had begun ripening soon after Ananda's death. After so many years these monkeys and nilgais have resurfaced to remind us of something!

...

Vallabha, the mother of Jayakar, and Medha, the mother of Vishwanath—both the sisters have come to their mother's house after a long time. They have met each other after so many days. The sons-in-law of Ananda have also come: Visho, the husband of Vallabha; and Kanh, the husband of Medha. Megha has also come with his wife and children.

Milu is calling his wife, Ananda...Ananda... Then he remembers that she is gone now. Then he begins to call, where is Vallabha... where are you Medha...? Where are you Jayakar and Vishwanath?

Vallabha and Medha both come and Milu begins singing. The song often sung by Ananda: the songs that Ananda sang for Vallabha and Medha:

*Red fairy O the Pink fairy  
 Red fairy O the Pink fairy  
 O. Over sky would dance the Indra fairy  
 Mother O, give eye to the blind immediately*

The father and both the daughters began crying.

...

"Ananda's death has been a disaster for you. Even though you are from Brahmin caste and Ananda was from the tanner's caste, the love between you two is incomparable. Do not be unhappy over her death. Brahma is without sorrow. The fanciful face of Brahma is pure joy. Thereafter your unhappiness over Ananda is inappropriate."

"Milu, there is a difference between the conscious and the unconsciousness; but that is not absolutely true. The living beings are of many types and ignorance is also of many kinds. Ignorance is one vice but the reference to it cannot be Brahma, it cannot be a complete soul. Its reference can only be an incomplete soul. Ignorance then is not true but it is not a major untruth either."

"Milu, please remove this ignorance. That is called liberation, that liberation which Ananda has achieved."

And on Milu's face, complete peace could be seen.

...

Milu remembers the discussion he once had with Ananda, a long, long time ago...

"Ananda, while talking to you I am gripped with fear again and again. My father's weakness is his possessiveness for the palm leaf inscriptions. So please remember all this: when my

father asks you how these palm leaves should be preserved, then your reply should be: 'by protecting the books from water, oil and loose binding, by drying these in the shadow' These books contain 500 to 600 leaves. I will bring some of those books for you to see. One leaf is one-hand-long and about four-fingers wide. These are covered with wooden frames on top and bottom. On the left side there remains a hole through which a thread passes binding the leaves together."

"Will your father agree?"

"He will have to agree. He does not have the means to bring a Bahrain bride. I once gave a farmer two rupees in advance for buying some land. But my father brought the advance back. He is saving money. He will have to spend Rs. 700 to have his son married into a good Brahmin family and preserve his superior genealogy. But would that Brahmin bride come and preserve his palm leaf inscriptions?"

Once plague destroyed two quarters of the village; those of the Mishras and those of the westerners got almost annihilated. Nobody kept count of how many people died in the surrounding areas.

Milu was victorious. Milu, of the Nyaya School of Philosophy, had won over Srikar of the Mimamsa School of Philosophy!

And the marriage of Ananda and Milu was thus solemnised.

He remembers his love talks with Aanda. Milu, it seems, is going to meet her. Ananda is dead. She slipped into the Balaan river. The marks of her feet slipping into the river are quite visible.

Milu sees that mark and his heart fills with joy, he slips in waves of emotion...

Ananda and Milu would very often meet, take walks in the fields, the orchards, grazing grounds, beside the river. Milu did not jump into the river. This slope had become slippery, thanks to the young boys. Milu had a lot of memories of this place, he would often sit there and take a plunge into the river cutting the waves with great strides of his arms.

"Hey, come and do this," he said.

"That is not a big deal."

"Perform first, then only I would believe."

Ananda tried carefully but...

He could not stop her, especially beside the river.

She must have come here... and then she slipped... and drowned.

She might have come to remember something.

"Yes. Ananda has arrived. Bachlu, listen, listen to this song."

*Behind the house is the tree of china-rose flower  
 It is laden with fruits and flowers  
 A parrot came from the northern state  
 The parrot sat on the china-rose tree  
 The parrot eats neither fruit nor flower  
 It is destroying the branches and leaves  
 Beside the house there lives a jackal  
 O Jackal, please capture this parrot sitting over the tree  
 Once he tried  
 Twice he tried  
 Third time the parrot flies  
 Neither is this parrot a mystic*

*Nor is the partridge  
In the courtyard of Goddess Lukesari there is a tree of  
sandalwood  
Beneath the tree the cuckoos clamour.*

It was not the fallacy of words.

Next day after the ritual of fish and meat and after the Pooja of Lord Satyanarayan, Ananda neither cut the sandalwood tree nor encircled her courtyard.

The next day beneath that sandalwood tree the villagers saw two dead bodies in the tanner's quarter of the village. The voice of Ananda echoed in the sky, all the village folks heard this:

*Whichever jungle you would go dear lovable cuckoo  
A mark of a garland of blood would be left*

It was not the fallacy of words.

*Translated by the author from the Maithili original,  
"Shabdashastram," Jakhan Takhan.*



## FOREVER VIRGIN

*Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai*

**H**er heart was heavy; her face was pale. But no one noticed it.

It was a day of rejoicing in that house. The celebration of a marriage. Her sister's marriage—her sister, five years younger than her.

Like a machine she did all the work her mother asked her to do.

The day's bride was getting ready for the wedding *pandal*. To tie her hair into a bun and fix flowers in it, to pleat her sari—she should have someone's help. Doing it alone did not satisfy her. She called Kamakshi.

"Chechi, please come here. The *muhurth* is nearing."

Kamakshi has taste; she dresses well and also loves to help others dress well. But that day she did not pleat the sari well; even the *kumkum* dots she put on her sister's forehead went awry.

Will there be a *muhurth* for her also to dress up thus? And who is the right claimant to this *muhurth*? Her mother had tried her utmost to make this *muhurth* Kamakshi's.

Women's ululation and *nadaswar*—the bridegroom's procession. Kamakshi saw that her mother's face beamed with Joy.

"To marry the youngest daughter when the elder one is unmarried—" thus mother's mind had been vexed on the day of the marriage settlement. Kamakshi's youngest sister—a three-year old baby—stood close to her. She too will grow.

Kamakshi did not witness the ceremony. This *muhurth* is not for her.

For the first time the bridegroom came to the bride's house. That day, too, was a day of rejoicing. Everyone was anxious to pay special attention to the bridegroom.

With a tanned face Kamakshi did the work her mother asked her to do. Her fortunate sister was in a room—hiding herself. She did not come out of the room that day.

Though Subhadra sat down with others to have her supper she did not eat even a morsel of food. There was something special about her smile. Kamakshi did not see Subhadra again that night. There was no sign of her in the house.

Kamakshi did not have a wink of sleep. For the first time she spent the night alone without Subhadra in their common room. Where was Subhadra? How distant she had become! Throughout the day Subhadra did not say a word to Kamakshi. Mother was so happy with Subhadra. But she spoke harshly to Kamakshi once or twice.

Wasn't that *muhurth* Kamakshi's? It was past midnight. Kamakshi was weeping. She felt lonely. How long this loneliness would last! Outside an owl hooted. From the next room a conversation in subdued voices was heard—it lasted.

Subhadra's face showed fatigue. But what a change! She was supremely happy. An indelible smile played on her lips. Her hair was dishevelled, her lips dry, her body tired. She had not slept the previous night.

Subhadra had become a woman. Her sweet dreams had come true.

That day Kamakshi and Subhadra ended a conversation thus:

Kamakshi said, "He is a slippery fellow." Subhadra's eyes sparkled, her eyebrows curved. She protested, "That I suffer. Though a slippery fellow...I will not say anything more."

Kamakshi did miss Subhadra's delights. There is love and affection in the voice of Subhadra's husband when he calls her. His joy knows no bound when he sees her. She lisps, giggles and smiles; she cracks jokes with him. What is it that has made Subhadra his darling? Subhadra has no time to come out of her room; nor will he let her leave the room. She is his life! His everything.

Subhadra has a room to herself, a box and money. She has dhoties, jumpers and half-saris—any number of them. Previously their clothes—Kamakshi's and Subhadra's—were bought at the same time.

The world now sees a woman in Subhadra. Mother says to her many things, she consults Subhadra and Subhadra consults her. But Kamakshi—she is a girl. She is shy to speak to mother about those things which Subhadra is no longer shy of.

Subhadra knows many things about life. In those days when the sisters went about playing together, Kamakshi told Subhadra, "I have eaten five birthday dinners more than you."

Subhadra is going to her husband's house. He has built a house. Subhadra is the mistress of that house.

A handsome man somewhere must be having sweet dreams. And those sweet dreams must be taking shape round an indistinct woman-form. Isn't she the centre of those sweet dreams, Kamakshi thought.

She dresses well. She wears *kumkum* on her forehead and flowers in her hair—all for the sake of the lord and master of her dreams. She sees in her dreams his distant home. She preserves her beauty, her chastity, why, all that is hers, for this god. Weeks, months and years passed by. In the silent moments of the night, her eyes filled with tears, she would ask, "Where art thou?" But no one heard the question. The world found her an ideal maiden—one who guarded her virginity.

Mother belaboured Kamakshi's brother, "Kutta! how old is Kamakshi?" Kuttan replied, "I will marry only after she is married."

Years passed by. Mightn't there be a *muhurth* for Kamakshi? It was twelve years ago that she completed 16. These years have gradually taken away the youthful charm on her once glowing cheeks. The treasure of her youth will leave her—and she will soon become old and unattractive. On moonlit nights when jasmine flowers waft their fragrance in the air her yearning soul will mutely ask, "Where art thou?"

When she stands before the mirror, she is conscious that the freshness of youth has deserted her. Now this hair will turn grey. Her breasts, upright now, will stoop. The oblation reserved for her god is getting stale. "When art thou coming?" It is too late already.

Kamakshi's brother waited long enough. She was now thirty. He decided to marry. Mother said to Kuttan, "Kutta! what about my Kamakshi?"

"Mother! I have set apart a thousand rupees for him who marries Kamakshi." Kamakshi's brother too married.

Years passed by. No one thought a thousand rupees an attractive enough amount.

Once when Kamakshi stood before the mirror a stark reality stared her in the face. The *kumkum* dot on her forehead seemed to mock her. Her hair, combed and well-groomed and tied into a bun, did not become her age. She felt that she was making herself up like a girl in her teens.

But one thousand rupees! Kamakshi stood outside the fencing, staring vacantly. Far away in the wide world he had been wandering, engaged in numerous activities. Was it his fault that he was late? If the petals of this lovely flower had withered, whose fault was it!

Kamakshi prepared her youngest sister also for the wedding *pandal*. This time she did witness the auspicious ceremony. All her dreams had stunted. Her face became all the more tanned. Her eyes became suspicious like those of a misanthrope. Her too infrequent smiles never stretched beyond the corners of her lips. Her body was no longer lithe. She became indifferent to dress and make-up.

Dress up and wait for whom? For that shadow! Kamakshi laughed. Keeping the door open, listening hard for the footsteps of that illusive shadow, she had waited all these years. Husband! A knave on whom she will have to dance in attendance. She will have to become his and keep everything of hers for him alone...What for? To receive his kicks.... Has she been created for this?... Kamakshi shuddered. Subhadra's nuptial night... the night in which the latent womanhood is awakened... In the grip of a fleshly feeling Kamakshi ground her teeth.

In the pragmatic, calculating man who looks at you jestingly there is some treasure, a power that can make you his slave. She contemplated. She closed her eyes and contemplated and saw with her mind's eye that shadow; she embraced the air. Marriage! Its sacredness! Kamakshi once again laughed.

Life became difficult for her because of a sad event. There was only one person who had felt for her. There was only one person who had looked sympathetically at her—at her misanthrope's eyes and dark smiles and sense of shame—and wept for her. Her mother. She was bedridden.

Surrounded by her children, gazing on Kamakshi, she wailed, "Subhadra! Kutta! Janu! my...Kamakshi!"

She could only speak so much. Subhadra, Kuttan and others received Kamakshi with tearful eyes. A smile played at the corners of her lips. Wailing and looking on at Kamakshi that mother's soul left this world.

Subhadra persuaded Kamakshi to stay with her; Kamakshi agreed.

Subhadra had four children—four dear ones. Kamakshi's heart, though hardened, had still in it the softness to develop a sincere, affectionate bond with these children. She loved them and they loved her.

Bitter experiences, howsoever bitter they are, cannot subdue instincts. Perpetuation of species is a duty Nature has imposed on every creature. Kamakshi began to see some dreams.

When she combed the hair of Subhadra's eldest child, Kamakshi would say to her, "I would like to see a child born to you before I die."

Two of Subhadra's children slept with her. Keeping them close to her she would whisper into their ears, "Will my children be ever angry with me?"

They would say, "No."

This was the only thing that cheered her during her stay in Subhadra's house where she lived quietly and had no duties or responsibilities.

Kamakshi's body bloated. In her idle life she had time to think of many things. She spent her time indulging in long yawns and watching and studying the daily life of married women. Certain instincts, till now suppressed in her, began to rear their heads.

Subhadra is a married woman; she is dignified. She is the able and efficient mistress of a household. She is responsible for the birth, health, character and future of four children. She fondles them, scolds them and brings them up. Kamakshi was surprised. How is this? They grow up as Subhadra wants them to grow up.

She has a bunch of keys, money too. She spends money thoughtfully. She rebukes the wasteful servant. She talks to those men who call on her husband. She gets up at three in the morning and has no time to rest till ten in the night. How busy she is! She cannot have her bath or eat her food in time. Always she moves about in a hurry. She has her sorrows too; sometimes she unburdens herself before her husband and weeps.

The world respects Subhadra who has many duties to attend to. The world has certain dealings with her; the world knows her.

The wives of her husband's friends visit her. They talk to her animatedly and have to say many things to her. She has a status and is invited to attend functions in the village.

But no one has any dealings with Kamakshi. She is shy and cannot look a man boldly in the face. She has no work to do. She has nothing to say to anyone of them who come to the house, nor does she follow what they talk about. She cannot even discriminate between the right and wrong actions of Subhadra's children. She does not know how to correct them. How can she? She is like an inexperienced girl. That is how the world has accepted her.

Subhadra is fortunate. She is regarded by everyone as the elder sister by virtue of her position and Kamakshi who had not even once experienced the pangs of childbirth is taken to be her younger sister.

Subhadra was in the family way again.

Once at the pond a woman who was for long away from the village saw Kamakshi and asked a small girl standing nearby, "Is she Parameswaran Pillai's wife?"

The girl said, "No, she is her elder sister."

When the woman left the pond after her bath, Kamakshi showed her irritation to the girl. She said, "Why could not you say I am his wife?"

Subhadra came to know this.

What was it that Subhadra and her husband were talking about so late in the night in their room? Kamakshi got out of her room and craned her neck and looked into the room through an open window. The sight she saw... And Subhadra saw Kamakshi too.

Kamakshi rebuked one of Subhadra's children. It was out of place. Kamakshi and Subhadra had a row. Subhadra said, "You should not live in this slippery fellow's house."

Kamakshi cried aloud. Neighbours gathered at the house.

There was an unseemly scene.

The children did not sleep with Kamakshi that night. She called them, but they paid no heed to her. They went to their mother. Next day they behaved like strangers to her.

Kamakshi shifted to her youngest sister's house and from there to her brother's house. To the darling children of her brother she said, "Do not send your aunt away!"

It is a lonely house. Many years ago three girls and a boy grew up there. The house had once known children's voices and laughter.

Kamakshi has aged. Her hair has greyed. But she is still a coy maiden. She cannot look a man straight in his face. She combs her hair and wears bodice and jumper even though she is forty-seven.

A young girl! The world has no dealings with her. The world has had neither good nor evil on account of her. Perhaps she is still preserving her treasure for an illusive shadow of a lover. And her smiles too perhaps strain to hear his footsteps.

Three or four cats graze her leg and mew softly and go round her. She fondles each one of them.

The loneliness of the house is oppressive. Inside the house, darkness thickens itself. The roof of the house smokes only once a day. In that still house, all alone, Kamakshi must be weeping or sleeping or lying awake with a vacant mind. She is seldom seen outside. It seems the doors and windows of the house have remained closed for a long time. At dusk a wick burns there for a little while.

Kamakshi has slept alone all these years since the day Subhadra left her to sleep in her separate room. Kamakshi has no partner in life. Subhadra—she is fortunate; she has a partner. What is more, she can hear her children

whimpering and occasionally talking in their sleep. From the room in which, the sister had slept together, the younger sister went away on an auspicious day. But the elder one, Kamakshi, still sleeps there alone as she did years ago.

If physical contact with man is that which destroys virginity, Kamakshi is really a virgin. If bodily purity is chastity, she is a chaste woman. What goes on in her mind no one knows. There is no one in that house to know her secrets. This and her idle life provided facilities to her fleshly instinct. It will grow and spread like fire. Poor Kamakshi! She will begin to burn in that fire. But the story of her passion remains a secret unknown to anyone. And she was pointed out by the world as the model of a woman who guards her chastity.

When Kamakshi gets up in the morning, the weariness seen on the face of a bride in the morning of her nuptial night is seen on her face too. Her eyes are sunk, face fallen and body tired. But the freshness and the newness of the bride are not in her. In the morning when she is awake, Kamakshi hates the world—the world of men; she hates herself.

No one has seen the inside of her room; no one knows what it contains.

All her pets are tabbies. She never allows tom-cats to grow up. In the night tom-cats go round and round her house mewing and pining all the time for love. The beloved quietly gets out of Kamakshi's room and secretly mates with her lover. Kamakshi abhors the sight of mating.

He knocked on the door and called. There was no response from inside. He called again. Then after some time there was a query from inside. "Who is that?"

"Me, Kesavan. Please open the door." There was silence again. "Why don't you open the door?", he asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"No."

"What about what you said early today?"

She kept quiet. He pleaded with her. He protested.

She said, "I have lived these 47 years without it."

"Now I do not want it."

An owl hooted outside. It was an omen; it meant pregnancy, she had heard her grandmother say. Memories revived in her.

Like a 16 year old girl she felt the curiosity to know what it was. Why does woman worship man so much? Why does woman become man's slave? No, she should not have any connection for the sake of the perpetuation of species. Kamakshi is 47. What is the proof that she has come into this world? A family should spring from her loins. And she was able to realise it. Kesavan Nair called again.

She opened the door.

Her reaction to the ecstasy of her experience was violent. It was not necessary! Her face contorted. She hated herself. What awkward movements and gyrations! At that midnight she felt the need to have a bath.

Thus that virgin's first night ended. He knocked at the door next night too.

"No, no", she said. That dirty action... Never again did she open the door for any man. She had known it—that which man has and for which she has been waiting all these years—that great power in man.

But Nature is cruel. When Kamakshi killed all the male kittens, immersing them in water, when hatred of the male sex grew in her, she, at the same time, craved for a child,

the filigree feel of a child. After her first night she waited for about ten months. If she had this years before....

One morning her cats went round and round her and went on mewing.

*Translated from Malayalam by C. Paul Verghese*



## MOON AND RAHU

*Keisham Priyokumar*

**A**s the gun muzzle is abruptly thrust on my back, I was shocked. Is this a dream or reality... I fail to understand. I raise my hands. My whole body shivers with fear.

“Do not move! One move and you will be shot to death.”

Does the body move? I do not know. But trembling; the body is trembling. Is today fated to be my last day? I wonder. My grandmother, my wife, my three little kids appear in front of my eyes. Is this a dream?

Before me, the tall and well-built man with a pistol puts his hands into my pockets. He pulls off Rs. 1800 from the trousers... with some change. This was the balance of the salary brought home after having repaid some debts. The salary, received only today. The wristwatch is removed. I think—what next? He gropes me from head to toe. He made a gesture to the person standing behind: The gun muzzle pushes me from behind, towards the door of the

bus. I get on the bus, heave a sigh of relief. Finally alive, I begin to muse.

A dream? No, this is not a dream. This is reality. I have heard accounts of such incidents before. This is not new. But I have never experienced it personally. To return home now? To return home without the salary received after having waited eagerly for a month? How hard it is to wait for a month to pass! How will I manage this entire month? From whom to borrow? From where to repay the debts? When has the meager salary ever sufficed? How shall I break the news to my wife at home? Endless questions stifle me.

One by one they get on the bus, one after another. Most of them are government employees; returning home with their salaries. This is the last bus plying from Senapati to Imphal. Two or three old traders are the only women in the bus. Quietly, people settle down—in their respective seats; without producing a sound. The faces have turned pale.

"We are not looters. Our struggle is to secede from India and attain sovereignty. We are grateful for your aid. Do not have hard feelings." The leader comes up to the bus and explains. The passengers remain still as before; without uttering a word.

As soon as the bus starts off, the crowds heave a sigh of relief. They, who have been sitting quietly moments ago, start buzzing. Sapermeina! We have just crossed Sapermeina. People start conversing. The old woman sitting in front of me complains, "Those rascals, may they die of plague! They have taken away my trade goods. They did not spare even the meager three rupees from my purse. And then, begging for apology! This is why the army shoots and kills them often."

"This is a better situation, mother; they took the salary people had. Otherwise, they would have resorted to snatching the clothes people are wearing," a man observes.

"I would tear their jaws apart, if they did so." The old woman's voice has turned slightly odd. Is she crying? She wipes her face with her cloth. Then, she begins to curse pouring out swearwords from her mouth.

"What else to say mother! Life is becoming harder. Many of them, in the name of the revolution, are involved in looting and plundering; whether they are the valley-based or the hill-based groups, all are same."

I can no longer listen to all these remarks. I do not want to hear any more. My wife, my three kids must be waiting for the salary at home—for the salary. I lean my head on the windowpane—enduring with closed eyes. I want to forget everything as if it never happened; but I cannot close my eyes.

My father's mother—my grandma, my wife, three little kids, six of us live in the family. The eldest among the kids is a girl, turning fourteen. She has become an adolescent. The middle one is a girl as well, already eleven. The youngest is a boy, still a kid. I can be considered as the only man in the family. The meager salary of a LDC is feeding the family; and sending the children to school. It has hardly been five months since I was transferred from Imphal to Senapati. My grandma was very worried; about the new posting at the hill. Despite her age, she updates herself with the latest reports about the persistent killings and violence related to insurgency in both the hill and the valley. I know she did not want me to leave home. But what could she do? With any report of an impending army operation, she would plunge herself in the activities of the local *meira-paibis*, gathering all her strength and courage. I would often try to persuade her to remain calm at home. But she refused. She would rather ask me to stay at home

in Imphal. Since it is hard to manage the daily up-down bus fares with the small salary, I stay at Senapati for 10-20 days. Greatly concerned for me, grandma would remain restless day and night. She seems to have lost her strength in the last few months. I understand, grandma worries about her granddaughters as the army troops approach. This *yuga* is one of complete darkness to her. Devoid of any ray of light, it is an uncertain life. I fail to close my eyes. And I gaze through the windowpane.

The eastern hill range remains jet black. Ascending enough above the black range, the snow-white full-moon is shining in the sky—with a black spot on its edge. Yes, today is *Grahan*—the eclipse of a full-moon.

Grandma! As Rahu begins to swallow up the moon, Grandma worries for the moon. As the silvery light fades out of the world of the night, she would shed tears; she would fast; and she would curse Rahu. Now and then, she would yell, "Let go, let go!" She was not heard. Slowly and gradually, the moon was engulfed in darkness. She would remain indoors. She would only come out at times and shout out at Rahu. Grandma would not witness the earth fading into darkness.

"Stop! You need to report."

The bus is abuzz. It is Sekmai Police Station. The bus halts. What time is it? Absentmindedly, I check on my wrist.

Where did the loot happen? At what time? How did they look? Are they of hill or of valley? How many of them were there? What kind of weapons were they holding? Were the guns genuine or not? Were they underground cadres or ordinary highway looters?

Scores of question, the police officer asks. The answers from the crowd are jumbled. The officer notes down tediously on a piece of paper all the information. Then, he

starts inquiring about the quantity of jwelleries that were looted. Those are recorded on a separate paper along with the names. It looks as if the lost items could be recovered tomorrow itself. My body gets lethargic.

“Send a message to the SP, Imphal.”

Unmoving from his idle posture on the chair, the officer commands a constable. And with a taunting smile, he turns to the crowd standing jam-packed in the room and says, “It is a huge amount! Rs. 87,575 in cash; it comes to more than a lakh if we include other items.”

“Thanababu, Sapermeina is very near from here. Please arrest them right away if possible. Those trade goods were bought with a small capital. What about the money for tomorrow’s business?” It is the same old woman. Her voice shudders again.

“We have reported the incident to Imphal. Further instructions will soon follow. You may all leave now. We were informed of two bomb blasts in Imphal this evening, not long ago.”

“Was there any casualty, son?” She asks the officer anxiously. The old woman has forgotten her lost goods.

“Three persons are dead. And around 20 are injured. We are yet to receive the accurate count.”

“Was it by the army?”

“No, it was the underground militants, of course.”

There is silence. The old woman leaves the room with her *khwang-shet*<sup>1</sup> fastened.

“Driver, Khwairamband bazaar is reportedly barricaded. Drive fast.”

The police officer continues as he gets up from his chair.

<sup>1</sup> A small piece of cloth used by women, especially the elders, to wrap around the waist so as to fasten the *phanek* (the wrapper).

The bus journeys on at a faster speed.

Who could be those who are dead? Who might be those injured... I only hope my wife, by any chance, had not visited the market along with the kids. The old woman is sitting still, just as my grandma used to lean on a wooden pillar. True—my grandma used to trade at Nambol bazaar like the old woman. Only recently did she stop.

Nearly a half of the moon has been swallowed up by Rahu. The silvery light loses its pace on the earth. The hill ranges become darker. The stars are obliterated with flakes of dark cloud. The trees stand still in the darkness.

“Light off!”

We are shouted at as we have just crossed the Feidinga Bridge. All the lights in the bus are turned off. Under the dim moonlight, a line of troops is seen through the window standing along the roadside. Now, what? I stare up once—at the moon being swallowed up by Rahu.

“All the men are asked to get out of the bus,” the driver calls out.

As soon as we get off the bus, we are pushed towards the roadside and made to stand prostrate—in a line. I raise my head slightly and stare at the surroundings. The dark soldier standing in front of me jams an intense blow on my head with his boot. The forehead bumps on a rock. I can feel the pain. Slowly, I hold my forehead. The hand touches thick blood. Tears ooze out of my eyes. I do not understand the reason for the tears. It has been long since I cried last. What kind of pain is it today? Silently, I bite my lips tight.

Clutched by my hairs, I am pulled up. A torch light is directly cast on my face. I am being interrogated in Hindi.

“Where do you come from?”

“From Senapati.”

“Where is your home?”

“Tera Bazaar.”

“Why do you go to Senapati? A terrorist? Are you an extremist?”

“No, I am a government employee posted in Senapati.”

“You all are extremists, terrorists.”

Then his boot once again kicks me in the head. Thousands of stars appear in front of my eyes. Then again, the whole earth becomes dark. I can see hazily—the remaining bit of the white moon as Rahu swallows it up. The silvery light has disappeared. Could grandma be standing at the courtyard and shouting, “Let go Grahan, Let go Grahan!” or could she be out on the road holding a burning torch?

*Translated by Melbic Maibam from the Manipuri original, “Tha Amasung Rahu,” Nongdi Tarakkhidare, 1995.*



## A SONG BIRD

*G.A. Kulkarni*

On that dusty road, a queue of barefooted travellers was gradually pushing forward. Near a tree an old man with a long white beard was sitting under an arch-like green structure built at the gate of a town: it was as huge as the sky. His eyes were dimmed and devoid of any expressions as he had seen a great number of pleasures and sorrows of life which had passed across the road. It was not possible to predict his age if you go by his face; when the Venus must have risen for the first time on the horizon of the earth, his face must have been perhaps the same wrinkled one, as it was on that day. If the sun was dismantled and its pieces thrown in a labyrinth over the universe at some calamitous moment, even then his eyes would look on like those of a great seer.

He had spread numerous bowls in front of him and each one was filled with seeds. Each seed was dazzling like a jewel; they were of myriad colours. There was a heap of shrunken, withered and wasted plants lying behind him. However, nobody could have imagined that once these very plants had delivered live and real flowers.

Every traveller who would just pass along the road was tempted to hang around the old man and pick up at least one or two seeds from the bowls. Many of them would throw away those seeds with a sickening and repulsive feeling and they would walk away with wet eyes. However, no traveller was yet born who would cross the old man with a disenchanted and dispassionate mind.

One traveller stood in front of him and picked up a blue coloured gem-like seed. "It shall deliver a flower of friendship," the old man said. "Its colour would be like a piece of the sky and its fragrance would be like the jasmine flower. The impact of its fragrance would enable you to travel longer and longer and your body would never get exhausted and your mind would never dry up and wither away, but it will take years and years to germinate and sprout. Would it be possible for you to show so much patience and endurance?"

The traveller nodded his head with an impatient fervour and vehemence. With an exhaustive sigh and rue, the old man gave that seed to the traveller; but the traveller was not satisfied. He picked up a seed that was as large as a diamond and the seed sparkled like early sunrays. "This is the first seed of affection and warmth; it germinates and sprouts like a spark of fire or it dies soon within the flash of a moment, but the light of its flower could be seen in darkness. Like a guiding star of blood, it will always accompany you in your journey, but remember that you must take great care when you touch it with your hands, because its petals are edged with poison. Remember, the scars and marks of blood produced by it shall never get cured."

The traveller grasped not one but a fistful of seeds greedily. The seeds were of varied colours; some of them were peacock-neck coloured dark blue and green seeds; some were purple with a sharp spark that was ablaze inside; some appeared reddish like the tender mango

leaves and some were of dark brown colour like the back of a musk-deer. One has to pay the price of dreams not when one picks them up but when one throws them away; this fact was not known to the traveller. The face of the old man became more wrinkled and grave. He said, "Why are you taking so many of them? To get one seed germinated and sprouted, you need one full life. Your bones shall get as thin as sticks, and you have to induce and stimulate faith in yourself like a mad man."

The traveller smiled and looked at the old man. The arms of the man were very strong as he had just stepped into his youth and there was great confidence in his physical movements. He had a presumption that the seeds would sprout flowers with a simple puff of air. But the old man had seen a great number of powerful travellers getting furrowed underneath. He had seen the hands that had been wearied profusely while struggling with the flowers; he had seen the hands which were paralyzed trying to pluck flowers bloomed by a sprinkle of blood. But he did not say anything, because, he thought that this traveller should see all these in his subsequent course of journey. Besides, he was sure that even if the flowers would sprout, they would fall into the unclaimed heap lying behind him. There were very few travellers who would hold a flower in their steady, sedate hands and descend towards the western horizon. The old man knew names of all those travellers because all that was happening was his defeat; he was overcome by whatever encounters he had with the travellers. The old man smiled at the traveller as he moved forward. He was sure that all his hopes and labour would be turned into nothing and they would be lying in the heap behind him. Then, he turned his eyes to another greedy traveller.

The traveller tied four small earthen vessels to a bamboo stick wherein he dropped the seeds and balanced the stick on his shoulder and started his journey. Many

of his footprints were inscribed in dust and the sky got darkened many times, and then it brightened again. But there were no green signs of consciousness and the seeds were not sprouting at the surface of the vessels. His arms got disfigured and blemished and appeared like dry thin sticks and his rock-like chest bones became thin like the nerves of dry leaves.

With his eyes downcast, he looked at all these depressing sights. In the twilight of one evening, he bent over the seeds and sprinkled his tears on them with a shattered and traumatized heart. Later, on one occasion, he struck his finger with a knife, with a mind burning in intense haste, and smothering that red agony he sprinkled the simmering flow of blood around the seeds.

But the seeds of dream never opened their jaws and his journey was moving towards its end; the edge of the western horizon was away by a hand's distance. If you step down that much of distance, all your labour should be extinguished and over, then there would not be any heated gale and windstorm of pains and agony, nor any need of dreams, he thought.

He looked at the vessels with a gloomy and desolate mind. The seeds had proved to be impotent and weak. Thinking of destroying each one of them, he picked up the vessels one after another. When he held one of them, a dim figure of a woman seemed to beckon him in distress. She implored him with gestures of her hands saying, "No, no." When he picked up the next vessel, a man with a familiar face signalled him, saying, "Stop, stop." He picked the third one when his mother's bowls thrown away long back in an isolated street started wobbling in a circular way. He picked up the fourth one and a huge white lotus-like cloud beyond the horizon delivered a blue beam. In that blue beam of light, eyes of a figure sitting on the lotus-like cloud made a slight movement with a calm smile and the traveller withdrew his hands.

But now he was at a loss as to what he should do about the whole affair. The power of his body and mind was slowly disappearing. His eyes were on the edge of extinction. Weakly he looked at the other travellers. Some of them had already thrown away their vessels or smashed them in anguish and distress. Some still waded along with unsteady steps, the vessels resting on their shoulders had their bottoms shattered and the mud and the seeds had fallen off long back. However, with empty and shattered vessels hanging on their shoulders, they were treading towards the horizon with crazy stubbornness.

All the strength, stamina and determination of the traveller was on the brink of dissolution and the residual warmth and affection was being absorbed by the earth. The edge of the horizon was at an arm's distance. But this ending journey also appeared to him as infinite and beyond tolerance. With one foot he stepped below the horizon and with a desolate and shattered mind, put down all the vessels.

And his eyes suddenly sparkled; red, blue-golden and purple sprouts came up like colourful rays. Now, a moment of fulfilment rose in his life, just for once. But he had already put one step below the horizon and there was only one breath left with him. He drenched it in his tears and he spread it out softly over the sprouts.

Those four sprouts came together and a divine huge bird rose out of it and flew towards the sky. Its wings were blue, eyes were like drops of blood, its beak was purple velvet and there was a golden plume of gem on its head. It flew upward like an arrow and started singing in notes that sounded like threads of light which were delivered from the starlight in the company of similar birds. As soon as its notes were heard by the travellers who were still treading past, their faces were illumined and their bodies enchanted and charmed and their footsteps got new life.

It was true that the travellers were enthralled by the notes of the bird but its meaning was realized by that traveller only... the bird followed him by picking up songs one by one from his life and made an eternal nest for itself. The nest simmered with the voice of the mother who would surrender her velvet like soft breast in the thundering of a midnight lightning. Intoxicating fondling touches of the lips of a passionate young woman, scratches of deprivation, simmering scars of contempt, unloved and abandoned tears shed behind a dense curtain of darkness... marks of all these were in the nest.

After listening to that music, the old man who had lagged thousands of days behind came running fast to the front. He spread out his net held in his hands to a greater height in order to catch the bird. But the bird kept carving designs of notes with calm confidence above its nest. Being defeated, he withdrew his net in dejection and hopelessness and tore off each one of its threads.

The edge of the horizon was felt by the traveller and with a final gloom and disheartening strain the traveller pushed his body beyond the horizon. But his face was steadied with a mild smile of contentment.

The old man while handing over the seeds smiled as usual, but there was at least one traveller who had snatched away the final laughter from him, and was victorious.

*Translated by Deepak Borgave from the Marathi original "Geet Pakharu",  
Saanjshakun, 1976*



## THE POWER OF DREAMS

*Indra Bahadur Rai*

If dreams could be held under control and used according to one's wishes, they would take the form of something powerful. It would become the third obedient relative of one's thoughts and imagination, thereby becoming a capability that could become most helpful to man. A long and careful training by a psychoanalyst in the understanding of the subconscious is very important. Tired of the uniformity in production, nature sometimes seems to endow this power to some people without much consideration...

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One night, Manbahadur dreamt of a man he had never seen or known before.

In Manbahadur's own words "I had never seen that man before nor did any of the men in the stories I had read, seem or feel like him. That man in red shoes, khaki pants, striped green coat and a hat, about six feet tall was walking without looking at me, taking notice of nothing,

walking past other people and approaching me from the opposite side of the road. As he drew closer, I looked carefully into his face... the dream became confused and incomprehensible this time... when it became clearer, he was telling me: 'So you want me to give you Rs. 10, isn't it? If I am telling you that I shall give it to you, I will not rest till I do so. If I had known that I would need Rs. 10, I would have carried it with me.'"

"So, when will you give it to me?" I asked sternly. He turned his long pointed nose, dark skeletal face and blight eyes towards me and said: "I shall carry a Rs. 10 note with me all the time. Whenever you meet me next and ask me for it, I shall give it to you. If I go back on my words, may a passing jeep run over and kill me."

While taking the oath, the man looked extremely scared.

After getting up in the morning, as I was taking a look at the flowers in the garden, I had begun to ask myself what the indication of such a dream could be. Money is the source of all feuds and expecting to get into one during the day, I became cautious.

I was going towards my workplace, taking the sidewalk. Just then, I realised that I had reached the exact spot that I had seen in my dreams. As people were walking, I stood there for a while and looked closely at the place. If a quarrel is to take place, it shall be here, in this very place. However, everyone was quietly walking along their own way. I considered myself a fool and started moving ahead towards my destination. Just then, I saw—from far away, a man was coming... He was wearing a green double-breast coat and somewhat round Khaki trousers. He was obviously walking in fear, as he was hurriedly crossing the road. I was astonished and stopped. That man even had a hat on but he would just not look at me. When he got closer, I looked carefully at his face. It is the same man!!

I was not scared at all; instead I suddenly grabbed on to something irrational. "Let me ask this question for myself" the thought began to take hold of me.

Walking as quietly as he was, I stopped him and said, "Give me the Rs. 10."

The man looked at me with eyes wide open. Again he looked at me from top to bottom. He did not understand a thing. He tried to ask something but his open lips moved only a little. Then he took a step back! I was still looking at him as if I would swallow him up. One of his hands went slowly into his coat pocket, took out a greenish brown ten rupee note and without saying a word, gave it to me. I accepted the money and walked on.

I kept feeling that he had turned back and was constantly looking at me till the post office hid me from his view.

I did not tell anyone about the incident. I feared that after hearing it, others would make unnecessary comments, add to the real story and present it to others. However, I would without fail, look at the Rs. 10 note at least once a day. Somewhere doubting that it may be a fake currency, I even compared it to the number series of fake notes that I had noted in my diary. The currency was not fake. After a few days, I began to wonder and doubt if one could buy things with the Rs. 10 note. One day, I tried to buy a book with the money. The shopkeeper accepted it and put it in his cashbox immediately. I shamed him and took the note back from the shopkeeper, gave him another one instead and ran back home.

I was in a fit of fear the whole night thinking that perhaps my secret had been gradually revealed right from the beginning.

The man did not appear in my dreams again. I did not even encounter him during the day. I went to the police

station once in a while to ask about any report of a man run down by a vehicle. Such an accident had not been reported in five to six months. Later, I began to feel that the police officers had begun to look at me with suspicion. Afraid that they may discover the secret, I became cautious and stopped going to the police station. Everything had become peaceful once again. Just then, that man came to my house one early morning. He had become very thin and frail. He looked very scared when he saw me. As for me, I began to get angry because of the fact that I had to see him again.

"Please do not get angry on seeing me here." He came closer and in a sad voice said, "Are you getting angry at the fact that you will have to return the Rs. 10? You will have to give that back anyway"

"You will not get it. You will not even get a rupee back."

"Why will I not get it?" Despite the polite tone, he firmly kept saying, "Why did I give you that Rs. 10 note, tell me that."

It was difficult for me to answer.

"You tell me why you gave it to me. You had to give it to me. Why else would you give it to me? You calculate everything carefully and if you still feel that I have to return the money to you, I shall give it to you. If I go back on my promise, may a truck run over and kill me."

He kept standing with a sulky face!

I walked away towards the market.

The following day he appeared early in the morning again. He kept waiting for approximately half an hour as he kept pacing the garden.

"There is no food in the house, which is why; how can you joke when I am starving?" In a tone that suggested he could cry any moment, he said, "Please give it to me, so that I can buy some rice and go home."

I had really begun to tease him, I began to say the same thing: "First go and bring the account and then show me what I owe you. I shall give it right away. Do not behave like a child and claim someone else's money, as if it were yours. I cannot have taken a petty sum of Rs. 10 as a loan from you."

At the end, as he was about to leave, he said: "Keep it! And become prosperous by deceitfully taking the Rs. 10 from me. Hope you develop a paunch. In your attempt to joke with me, you may have to repent later for having killed me! A great murderer you will be. I may die but I shall see..."

A couple of days after this incident, I met him on the same road. However, he did not speak to me. He looked scared and ran off taking the sidewalk. I still carry his Rs. 10 note in my pocket. I have developed a fondness for it. The day I will have to part with it, my...

A week later, as I was going towards my workplace in the morning, he was coming towards this side with a friend. The unique thing about his friend was his feather hat and police boots. Even though I pretended not to have seen them, yet I did see—that with his pointed mouth, he was directing his friend's attention towards me. I wondered at the sort of things he must be saying, to slander my image. I tried not to be bothered. As he drew near, the feather hat man said, "Yuck!" and laughed. Despite this, I did not lose my temper. Without paying any heed, I moved on in the direction I was to take.

From the next day onwards, neither did I see the man in my dreams nor did I meet him in reality. It is over nine to ten months now, but he has not come. I have begun to feel a strong sense of repentance. May be he really had nothing to eat. What if he had actually died by now? What if it was me, who got him into that miserable state? If only I could get a single opportunity to, meet him, I would...

I tried in vain to search for him. A few days later, something unprecedented happened—I even forgot his face or what he looked like. Now I was absolutely sure that he was dead.

I inquired from a lot of people but could not find out if he worked anywhere. I went to the hospital but there was no one there who had been run down by a vehicle. It had already begun to prick my conscience. I had begun to feel that I had some sort of sickness of the heart and feared that in times to come, I would go mad. Till the day there is life in my body, I shall be infatuated with the Rs. 10 note but if I am unable to return it to him, I may become more restless with every passing day. I should definitely talk to someone about my condition. May be, if only, I could at least go to his cemetery and cry out loud, maybe...

Out of the blue, the feather-hat man came to my mind. I had to meet him anyhow because meeting him meant resolving everything.

I went and stood at the same spot on the road early in the morning. He did not come.

The following day also, he did not come.

On the third day, I had been standing for a while, when I saw him coming from far away. Behaving in a way that suggested he wanted me to see him, he was moving ahead with faltering steps,

All of a sudden I went up to him and asked in one breath—"Where is your friend?"

He was confused.

"Where is your friend, tell me where?" I asked him impatiently again and in my excitement, I held his hand tightly as if I feared he may run away and disappear forever.

"Which friend are you talking about?" he asked me instead. "Your friend, yours? You went walking past this place with him one day."

"Who may it be..."

"To hell with who he may be. He is the one in khaki trousers, green coat and a hat..."

"Oh! He is not my friend."

"Let him be anybody. Where is he these days?"

"He is dead."

"Dead?"

"It has been two months now"

I let go of his hand.

"He did not have a job and because he had nothing to eat, he died, He died because he was sick. Instead of shrinking and dying in his bed, he thought it was better to jump off from the cliffs of Kageybhīr and die." He told me this but in response I could not say anything to him.

At night, while sleeping, the image of the cliffs of Kageybhīr kept appearing before my eyes. If I went there and shouted in the real world, I wondered what people would think of me. In my dreams, however, I had reached Kageybhīr....

The moon was up in the sky

The tall, black, bare *Totala*<sup>1</sup> tree looked like it was tightly and safely securing its bags full of money and standing there on the cliff.

I stood on top of the cliff and looked down. It was a stony cliff filled with long ferns in some places.... I went there and screamed:

"I never got to know who you were. I have your Rs. 10 with me. The dream had a magical influence on me. That is the only reason I did not return you your money. You should not have died. I have honestly become very

<sup>1</sup> *Totala* is a tree found in hilly regions which looks bare because it has few leaves. The tree bears flowers before it fruits which have medicinal values and are eaten in the form of a vegetable. The seeds of the fruit are used in Buddhist rituals of worship.

attached to your Rs. 10 note. Even then, if someone asks me for it, I shall return your money to the man who talks to me about it..."

I was thinking of saying a lot of other things when the man appeared from the base of the *Totala* tree.

"How can I be dead? It would have seemed as if I died due to lack of money! It was me who taught the feather-hat man what to say and sent him to you." He laughed and said, "Will you at last return my money, now?"

I was also laughing.

After I finished laughing, I took out his Rs. 10 note from my pocket and as I was giving it back to him, I said, "Here, take it. Take away your money at once. I will not keep it with me for even a second,"

When the man saw the Rs. 10 note in my hand, he stepped back in fright as if he was suspicious of a conspiracy. He then said: "I will not take this money; this money I will not take, not now, I just will not take it!"

I threw the Rs. 10 note on the ground and said: "Once this has come out from my pocket, it will not go back. The money is there; pick it up and take it. I am going,"

That man shouted out loud: "I just will not take this money today! If you insist on it, I will honestly jump off this cliff right now."

What if he never gets up in the real world because he jumps off the cliff and dies in my dream? This doubt began to take hold of me.

"Ok then, I shall keep it with me for one night but you will have to take it tomorrow" I said and picked up the money.

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Early morning today, somebody knocked at the door.

It was that man.

"Please give me that ten rupee note" he asked pompously.

I was amazed, but without a tremor in my voice I asked him: "When I gave you the money yesterday, why did you refuse to take it?"

"You are smart!" He mustered some courage and said, "You took my money in the real world and tried to return it to me in your dreams."

I began to feel that I had started understanding a bit. I began to have a headache. With much effort, I asked him one last question:

"Shall I give you the same Rs. 10 note or can I put together some change and give it to you?"

He gave a fairly simple answer:

"You can give me anything but not a soiled or a mutilated one."

*Translated by Anisha Chettri from the Nepali original "Sapana Shakti,"  
Bipana Katipaya, 1960.*



## FATHER AND SON

*Fakirmohan Senapati*

In Cuttack everything has to be paid for, no one gives you anything gratis. Even to light the fire you have to buy a box of matches (instead of borrowing embers from your neighbour as in the villages).

From the time he was confirmed in his job as a peon in the postal department, Hari Singh served in various mofussil post offices. But for the past 10 years he was attached to the Head Post Office at Cuttack. A hard-working man, he had received due promotion and become head peon with a pay of Rs. 9 per month.

However much he pinched and skimped, the minimum expenditure for one month would not come to less than Rs. 5. And then he had to send Rs. 4 every month to his village for his wife and eight-year-old son Gopal. The two just managed to keep body and soul together on that meagre sum, for living was much cheaper in the country.

But if it was reduced by even a single pie, their very existence would be at stake.

Gopal studied in the Upper Primary School. His tuition fees amounted to two annas only, but whenever a slate, text-book or writing material became necessary, the additional expense involved made that month miserable. Sometimes the old man went hungry. "I may starve but my Gopal must study," was his constant thought.

All of a sudden, one day, the postmaster glanced at the service-book and said, "Hari Singh, you are 55 now. It is time you retired. You must stop working."

Singh was thunderstruck. How on earth was he going to exist? Whatever else might happen, Gopal's education would be cut short! Since the day his son was born, Singh secretly nursed a mighty ambition: his boy would become a sub-postmaster or, at the very least, a village postmaster.

But unless he knew some English it would not be possible to get such a high post. As there were no facilities for learning that language in the village, the boy had to be brought to Cuttack. Once he retired, all his hopes would be shattered. He was terribly worried. Sometimes he spent sleepless nights and daybreak found him still worried.

The postmaster had a soft corner for Singh. Even though the gentleman had his own servants, every evening after office work Singh went over to his house and did odd jobs.

In the evenings, the babu relaxed in an easy-chair and read the English newspaper. It was then that Singh prepared that special mixture of tobacco and treacle for his *chilam* which no one else knew.

One evening Singh filled the *chilam* to perfection and blew the embers just right. The babu belched smoke like a steam-engine and his eyes began to close. Singh knew the moment had arrived. He prostrated himself at his master's feet, joined his palms together and, with great humility and respect, gently narrated a synopsis of his

sorrows in well-chosen words. He did not forget, of course, to mention his great expectations for Gopal.

The babu's eyes were still shut. In a grave and dignified manner, he said, "All right, put in an application."

The postmaster had some basis for his confidence. Whenever postal inspectors or superintendents happened to come on a visit, they stayed with him, and it must be said to his credit that there was never any hitch in the arrangements made to satisfy the gastronomic requirements of the senior officers. On such occasions Hari Singh was much in demand, the babu could be heard shouting for him constantly. An old hand, Singh had served under several officers and had studied their tastes and temperament.

He had to stay till quite late in the postmaster's house. For, maybe due to Orissa's horrid climate, some of these babus (from Bengal) might suddenly feel sick and start vomiting. Then the ubiquitous Singh was unobtrusively at hand with soda water and lemon to provide instant relief to the sufferer. With the babus sleeping comfortably at last, he went home at midnight to do his own cooking. Thus was he known to the big bosses.

The postmaster wrote a strong recommendation and forwarded Singh's application to headquarters. In a few days the extension orders arrived. Singh was very pleased and wrote home the good news.

People are concerned only with present joys and sorrows and do not bother about what destiny holds in store for them. Singh's great joy burst like a bubble.

A letter came from home-Gopal's mother seriously ill, Pneumonia. No hopes of survival. He showed it to the postmaster, the kind-hearted man immediately granted him leave.

Singh ran in breathless haste to his village. When he reached his house, the light went out from his eyes, the world was enveloped in darkness. The old lady's end was very near. With failing sight she gazed fully at her husband. Raising her hands slightly, she saluted him and signalled him to give her the dust from his feet. Had she been waiting only for that bit of dust?....It was all over.

Singh's home was truly broken. He sold the few household goods and left for Cuttack with his son. Gopal was admitted into the Middle English School. What with the increased expenditure on the boy's education and upkeep in town, Singh found it impossible to make both ends meet. The little he had managed to put by in the savings bank while in service, was all spent on his son. He had to sell the few bell-metal utensils as well.

So one day the Dak Munshi babu told his father, "Look here, you have done me no good. If you feel like staying, stay; otherwise, leave the house. And another thing, when babus come to meet me, you are not to exhibit yourself."

On hearing Gopal Babu's words, the old man felt a buzzing sensation in his head and ears and sat down dumbly. To whom could he complain? A son's story-it was like a sore in an unmentionable place, it could neither be seen nor shown. The one in whom he could have confided was no more. He remembered the old woman and wept bitterly. There was no one to whom he could turn, but in joy or sorrow he always thought of his wife. He stopped crying and wiped away his tears, lest they prove inauspicious for his son.

Next morning Gopal Babu was to leave for Makrampur to take up his appointment. He had not cared to inform the old man. He got up early in the morning and said scornfully, "Ai father! I am leaving for the mofussil. Fetch

the luggage. It is not much, so don't you dare engage a coolie! If you do, I am simply not going to pay him!"

The babu donned his dress, thrust his umbrella under his arm and twirling his walking stick walked away.

What could the old man do? He gathered everything together, made a big bundle and placed it on his head. He was hardly able to walk. He had not the strength. At times tears flowed from his eyes. Forced to rest at several places en route, it was evening by the time he reached Makrampur.

Because he was late, the babu scolded him. The old man sat quietly easing his weariness.

The babu was away at the office in the daytime. Hari Singh silently went about his tasks. No one ever saw the father and son sitting together and chatting. A postmaster is one of the dignitaries of the village, and many dropped in to pay him their respects. But what converse could they have with an ignorant old man?

The place did not suit Hari Singh's health. Whenever he had fever he suffered from a persistent cough, which worsened at night. The babu's sleep was disturbed. "Throw that old man in the screw-pine hedge outside," he ordered his peon. An ignorant man, the peon knew no English but possessed a native heart. "How can I throw out an old and ailing man!" he wondered.

One day Hari Singh was running high temperature, and had not had a bite of food for three days. The cold of midnight made his cough worse. The babu was incensed. He delivered two "English thumps" on the old man's chest and flung his bedding out. Hari Singh left for his village.

Gopal Babu has been happy since that day, according to usually reliable sources. As for Hari Singh, with his two acres of land under sharecropping, he receives his share

without any effort, and his pension money covers the cost of clothes and groceries. He has started taking a little opium, after contracting that cough, and all this is within his means. He sits on his verandah with God's name on his lips.

Thus both father and son are happy.

*Translated from Odia by Padmalaya Das*



## ANTS

*Gopinath Mohanty*

Slowly they moved up, the two tired feet, one after the other. The muscles of the leg tore apart, something hammered inside the chest furiously. Sweat-drops hung from the rim of the hat as rain-drops from the leaves. The shorts and the shirt were dripping wet and yet the body moved, as if leaning on the wind! Presently it was the top of the hill. Ramesh paused.

Far far below, the forest of tall trees looked dense-dark. The forest seemed to climb down the stairs of the valley to the nether region! But up there, the bald floor of the hill glittered in the sun, grass-rimmed, with the blue sky all around.

It was no joke climbing hills, Ramesh told himself. But how could a young officer say that to the older people accompanying him! So he brushed away his pain, almost by an act of will, and with teeth pressed against the lower lip joked to them, "What! Tired out with this much only!" And then his lean wiry figure scuttled across pointed, rough stones.

His *chaprasi* Binu came up, sighing like an engine; his huge turban slowly rising like a earth-coloured mushroom. Dark and stockily built, gold rings in nose and ears, a flask and a gun slung round the neck: that was Binu. He came up and stood behind Ramesh as a signboard.

Waves of a choral song's refrain came up from down below: *bailé, bailé*. One, then a second, then another. Eight figures slowly emerged from behind the tall grass. Kondhs in loin clothes, with baskets carried at the two ends of poles balanced on the shoulder. The song ended. Binu shouted, "Lazy bones, how-so-much you chide them they will always trail behind! We have become rather old," somebody retorted; and then they broke into peals of laughter and sat a little apart lighting their home-made cigars.

Binu served tea from the flask. And sipping tea under that *amla* (gooseberry) tree Ramesh asked, "Did you come this way before Binu?"

"Yes, Sir, last time two years ago; many times before that."

"Did any other officer walk up this way?"

"So many, Sir. This is after all on the road to the market."

Ramesh felt somewhat depressed. Ever since childhood his greatest passion and pleasure lay in a feeling of superiority, of being ahead of all. That was indeed a long and chequered story of success! That insignificant, rustic poor boy from a village in North Balasore gradually growing up to his present status; from the school to the college, friends losing out in life's cruel race, falling behind, seen no more; scholarships, medals, prizes, memories of success. Then the job, unknown coming to be introduced, the *chaprasi's* salute, the supplication of the Insurance Agent and the inevitable marriage proposals. The world cared for him, saluted him. Those early successes in life's

struggles, self-importance gradually maturing into self-confidence, making him feel he was somebody.. Those innumerable others around him were of no significance except as providing a backdrop for his glowing self. But that uneasy persistent feeling at every step! People had been before him, there were foot-prints ahead on the road and in comparison he was so small. At least while climbing the hill he could work himself up to some happiness for was he not the first man from civilization walking up that way? But now even that imagined pleasure was slipping away. And Binu was describing vividly the *Burra Sahib's* five-day camp on this hill-top, the hunting, the merry-making and the dances that had transformed it to a city!

That was merely another time. Men had come and gone away; only the forest looked dark as ever. Binu reminisced: "No more the dense forests of those days, wild animals prowling everywhere. The Kondhs have cleaned up everything. Here itself were Kondh villages; when the forests vanished the tigers rampaged in the villages and the villagers had to move away."

"These days there are no forests? Then what are these?"

"Yes, the chopped-off trees also grow again and make a forest. But those forests!"

Ramesh thought of the endless stream of men roaming the forest; penetrating, recoiling and coming back again, the thin hill-stream of their happiness and pain that never died and even now murmured as it rushed down the pebble-bed.

He felt a sudden burst of anguish that dulled his acute awareness, of separate self and merged it into that eternal stream.

A thin line of ants had already formed around the broken bits of biscuits. Ramesh was startled and smiled to himself: "Here too the ants!" They reminded him of the hidden subterranean roots of his visit to the hills.

He asked Binu, "You think we can catch the rice-smugglers?" "Most certainly, Sir. Whichever way it goes the smuggled rice has to appear in Kaspawalsa market. It is only 10 a.m. now and climbing down that valley we will be at the market before two. And then, where can they escape? We will catch them all." "Fine, let us then move without any more delay."

Binu was vexed at the prospect of no rest, even up here. And he shouted at the Kondhs, directing them to move. The Kondhs also muttered their dissatisfaction. No rest, only run and run fast. In their strange primitive language, they showered abuse on Binu and his forefathers. These fellows, they thought, knew only how to order: bring water, fetch fuel-wood, carry luggages. And they learnt only a few words of command. No harm abusing them soundly! And the Kondhs talked among themselves what fools these fellows must be trying to catch people for selling rice across a border. Hunger was universal and whoever wanted rice had a right to purchase it wherever he could. Whatever could be the crime in that? And who after all produced the rice? Or could it be that these people had separate laws of justice; laws under which it was a crime to distil liquor, to chop off forest trees, to purchase rice, to sit down when tired after a long day's trek carrying heavy luggages? But there was no time to talk further. The *chaprasi* had started abusing, the officer had started walking fast. The Kondhs got up. All their complaints joined up to a song with a refrain.

The dense forest lay ahead. Down the valley the road opened up as a tunnel. Their song in chorus pleased Ramesh. How soothing it sounded! What did it mean? May be some community legend.

"Binu", Ramesh roared.

Binu ran up to him full of bitterness and abuse inside. At 55, *sans* six teeth, the bald patch ever growing on the head, the body wanted leisurely pace, quiet and ease. But

this young officer would hurry up everybody, run as mad himself and drive others mad. Binu had enough to live on and could easily do without the job. But minus the power it gave him, would he not be shorn of his magic, reduced to only another person among those numerous insignificant others on whom he had fed all his life? And it was this fear of losing the powers of the mysterious magic, the terrible charm that drove Binu up the hill.

"Binu, how nicely these folks sing," Ramesh said.

"Very nice indeed, Sir."

"But what does it mean?"

Tossing his *pugree* from side to side and giving another twist to the betel inside his mouth Binu explained as a wise man, "Of course, it is that song of the Chaitra festival."

"But what does it mean?"

"That same old story of *Dhangdas* and *Dhangdis*<sup>1</sup> and their love for each other."

"Do they always sing this song?"

"Always, Sir!"

"But does *bailé* mean jasmine?"

"You have got it right, Sir. At this rate, you will be a master of their language in no time."

Ramesh was pleased with this answer and asked, "Do they sing songs even in ripe old age?" "In this country of ours none ever grows old, Sir." Ramesh took mental note. *Bailé* is jasmine and the Kondhs only sing of love.

And Binu felt happy at having befooled Ramesh.

And the Kondh labourers continued their trek singing their tale of woe, the unending story of misfortunes; all the while heaping abuses on the officer and his wretched *chaprasi*. Groups of Kondhs met them along the road, laughed, exchanged jokes, joined the music and partook of the same cruel destiny of pain. They could so easily

1 Unmarried Adivasi boys and girls, respectively.

share the mocking spirit of the songs! When there was a lull in the singing Binu shouted at them and asked them to continue. "None grows old in our country": Binu's own words took a new shape and meaning for himself. He thought of his youngest wife, his third whom he had snatched away from many eager hopes, by paying extra 'bride-price' to her parents. In this land of forests superiority consisted in snatching away things and in that man excelled animals at times. But Binu's trickery concealed the frustrations of a life-time. He had orchards, lands, houses, cattle—everything but a child of his own. With growing years he felt this vacuum more and more. He remembered his youngest wife and became anxious as to how his two elder wives would be treating her. In this country, if a woman did not feel happy with her husband she just left. Binu started worrying whether his youngest wife was happy with him. And then he remembered that young *chaprasi* Bisi, a distant grandson who often came to his house to crack jokes at his grandma!

"Binu."

"Yes, Sir."

"How is it that this smuggled rice is not detected any earlier? For smuggling to Madras they must be stacking the rice somewhere and the businessmen must be carrying stock from there. But though we have by now trekked four days from Koraput, nowhere we saw any such thing."

"It could be detected only if it moved in bulk, Sir." Saying this in disgust Binu remembered how he himself had been able to smuggle out a hundred maunds of rice at exorbitant rates. He believed that in a society which left everybody to fend for himself, pulling others' legs, trying to cheat others and thrive at their expense was only natural and right. Breaking rules for one's own selfish ends and fear lest one is caught were natural corollaries of such a selfish system, he thought. He tried to twist the direction of the conversation.

"Not much rice is being smuggled away by isolated individuals. At the market, Sir, you will see only small buyers from the plains down below, with 10 kgs., 20 kgs. of purchases. Only a few miles away is the Madras border and there the businessmen would be waiting with bullock carts, hessian bags and pots of money. Then cartloads of rice would move to Vizagpatam, Parbatipur and other places. Businessmen, after all, know the secrets of the trade, Sir."

Ramesh became serious. "We have to catch the stock of rice before it reaches the traders."

His eyes shone with the strange, fierce light of a hunter's eyes. A single theme was haunting him. Why should others steal away our rice? He felt it was an interference in his personal rights that must be resisted.

While speaking of 'our rice' his consciousness pictured one thing only: he was an Oriya, behind him lay the history of Orissa, the story of wars, empires and expansion at the cost of others. From the dust-heap and broken bricks of the past his mind returned to the degeneration of the present and sought to put the blame for this on the neighbouring states.

Fellows have already eaten up this country and made it all hollow. What now again?, he asked himself. He remembered the prey down the forest roads. His mind got intoxicated with the prospect of hunting down the rice smugglers. "If only I catch them," he clenched his teeth.

But he did not know what he would do if he caught them.

He hurried down the slope of the hill.

It was late winter and the heat of the walk gave the feeling of spring. Trees were full of foliage and flowers. At the end of the slope was a small village. Mango groves, fields, threshing grounds, rows of houses. Along the road stood a small boy and seeing unknown persons, he cried

for his mother and ran away. That was only the beginning. The calves tethered on the roadside strained at the ropes and started mooing. The womenfolk withdrew inside and stared with big blank eyes. One by one the villagers came near. Ramesh felt it was a known picture. His feet started dragging. He stood in the shade of a spreading tree and looked back. The hill stood behind him as a monstrous ghost of the imagination. Binu was coming down slowly panting and the Kondhs behind him almost running.

"Can we get some drinking water here, Binu," he asked.

"Of course, Sir." Binu was all attention. He opened the luggage pack and ran into the village with a glass and a *lota*. The Kondhs sat down for a little rest. Ramesh waited. In no time a *charpoy* was produced, somebody stood with a *lota* of hot milk. Another with a bunch of ripe bananas and a mixed drone of Oriya and Telugu entreated him, "It is already too late Sir and the sun has climbed almost to the top of the sky. The villagers would feel most unhappy Sir, if you do not pause here for some food and rest."

Rest! Ramesh laughed to himself. That self-same invitation all along the way. As if walled-in by forests and hills men only wanted to lean on one another. Pause here for a while, stay in our village for the night. Shadows of known trees, the slow, trailing smoke on half-recognised thatched roofs, men and women engaged in the familiar rituals of daily living. Men in forests, on the hills, everywhere the known world of men.

And yet, he had to move. That affectionate welcome of the village left behind would persist as a sweet smell for a while and then drift away in the indifferent wind.

Binu returned with some water. Ramesh drank it and said, "Let us now move." Suddenly an old woman appeared and stood in his way. A smile lighting up her time-worn face she said, "At this late hour, my dear son, how can you go without some food? Would your mother

have left you like this? Don't you have mothers and sisters in this village?"

Everybody smiled. The old woman was of the Kondh-Dora caste, an admixture of Kondhs and Telugus.

Suddenly Ramesh felt heaps of cool shade piling on his sunburnt eyes. But he said loudly, almost trying to persuade himself, "No, no, we have to move. There is so much to do." He dragged himself away. The shadow of that old woman's mother-face remained transfixed in his memory. Like all mothers' eyes, her eyes looked deep inside and an eternal 'alas' floated on her lips. She had no caste, no language. She was mother. The job on hand was forgotten for a while. But it came back again when he saw people on way to the market with headloads of rice.

"Binu, how far is the market now?"

"Just a little ahead, Sir. We have almost reached."

"Take care, no shouting, no noise any longer." Binu cautioned the Kondhs not to sing any more and walk silently. It was now a silent, cautious march like hunters in a forest. Deep silence reigned outside but there was so much noise raging inside. Ramesh raced hurriedly in his mind over the projected action. He would not merely stop the smuggling for a day; he would suggest a permanent cure for this evil in his report to the Government. That would bring him commendation, recognition and hasten his pace up the ladder of progress. It was like winning a prize or a special credit in the examination. He felt he richly deserved it. For was he not like Livingstone in Black Africa trying to locate the original source of illegal smuggling across the border? He felt overwhelmed with his own efficient and skilful handling of the matter.

A little ahead, on the road-side, a family was having the day's food in the shade of a tree. A small child twitching its wiry hands and feet violently lay on the ground, with its face to the sky. The blue sky was rent by its sharp cry.

The shrivelled figure of a young woman in rags, hair all dishevelled, left her leaf-plate of food and without even washing her hands, pulled away the torn rags covering her breasts and hurriedly put them to the child's mouth. The dried-up breasts dangled like rags. With the child clutched in her arms the young mother kept staring at the strangers. As though she was no person, but only some dishevelled hair and two indifferent distant eyes! There was no eagerness for any news, no care for anybody's eminence in those eyes. The world outside hardly existed. Seeming to look out on the world outside, it really looked, deep down in the flesh, to the dregs of the life-force where ultimate hunger pained, ultimate love covered bird-like offsprings under its protective wings. Three others were also eating rice, an old man, an old woman and the husband of the young woman. Only bones and skin, caves of eyes and masses of dense hair on the head. The eyes sometimes glittered. The little rice shone on the leaf-plates. It was no eating, it was a hungry dog's gobbling-up food, breathlessly. Under the tree the rim-broken and decrepit cooking vessels and the improvised fire-place lay gaping at the sky. The entire picture attacked Ramesh with its naked reality.

"Binu, who are these?"

"The Telugus from the valley, Sir. So many like them roam the jungles driven by hunger."

"Where is your home?" Ramesh turned to them. After two more repetitions of the question, the old man replied, without lifting his head from the leaf-plate and looking rather annoyed, "Simhachalam".

Binu explained to Ramesh that the place was 60 miles away. Ramesh remembered: once upon a time it was a part of Orissa. History stood before him as a huge dark hill, then it grew smaller and smaller almost becoming a mound of earth and then, suddenly it sank in the gaping, cold eyes of that young mother who was now feeding

and fondling the kid. Ramesh knew in a flash that the place may no longer be in Orissa, but it was there very much a part of the wide world and its people who were condemned to their ancient hunger. "So many like these are roaming the forests, Sir. The bigger fear of hunger has made them fearless of the lesser categories like forests and the wild animals," Binu said.

"Quite so, quite so," the Kondhs echoed. They had drawn nearer and an old Kondh said, "When hunger or pain attacks, men are all alike. Look! how hungry we have started feeling. Where is the arrangement for food, *chaprasi babu?*"

Silently Ramesh walked ahead. Suddenly he felt a creeping confusion darkening his objectives. He wanted to do justice, but no longer knew what that word meant. Always he had depended on the short-cuts of established ways and conventional modes, always he had bowed to established laws, written rules and had felt it wrong to look deeper to see what lay behind them.

Sometimes his sense of justice and fairplay had conflicted with the law but he had persuaded himself that after all duty was always hard and relentless like the churning of a machine. Driven by hunger somebody had stolen something, his pregnant wife had perhaps rolled and cried on the verendah of the *cutchery* with a year old child in her arms and entreated that there was none else to support them. But nothing had mattered; a thief, after all, had to go to prison. That was law. Somebody else had suffered a year's imprisonment for the theft of a pumpkin because of five earlier convictions. Relentless and cruel were the demands of duty, he concluded; no place for softness there. He resolved afresh; he had to catch the rice-smugglers. The noise of the market now sounded nearer. The rotten fishy smell of raw-hide was everywhere. Men emerged in groups from behind the forest trees. Some had headloads, others baskets hung from the two

ends of poles balanced on the shoulder. Small children peeped out of a few baskets. Bunches of fowl, legs tied together and heads looking down, dangling various other commodities and rice. The prey seemed very near at last. Ramesh felt a sudden thud in his chest. Almost running down the stairs of stones he shouted, "Binu, now we have had them!"

The market lay before them. Men huddled together, swarming all around like ants. A kaleidoscope of colours, many smells, an orchestration of droning sounds. Raw-hide's offensive smell choked the air; rows of stalls sold dried fish. Flies buzzed everywhere; so did the men. The smell of illicit liquor came wafting in the breeze from the neighbouring forest.

Lepers and men with 'yaws' disease, like dogs with weeping wounds, patches of raw wound of 'yaws' with small dark insects sitting on them. Healthy men and women pushing their way through the milling crowd. That was the market.

Ramesh suddenly noticed a young girl with the colour of *champak* flower and a well-carved body. One of her cheeks had a patch of 'yaws', the other cheek was looking red but there also 'yaws' had started. Yet she had decorated herself with flowers, moved slowly, a picture of grace, munching something. And she looked from the corners of her eyes which seemed to smile and invite others to a play. Ramesh closed his eyes and leaned on a tree in the centre of the market. Waves of noise were breaking on his ears. The mind's eye saw that young girl with 'yaws' on the cheeks and smile in the eyes. The Kondh boys danced on the hill-top.

And then he knew. In the midst of dense forests, on the top of hills man lived. The fire in his fireplace survived the howling wind and the cruel merciless weather. For man was like Dalua paddy; the more water, the more the

plant grew. 'Yaws' on the cheeks and smile on the leprous face. Straining all the life-force a rose had blossomed even though its petals were crooked and worm-eaten. It may wither and fall. Yet it smiled.

Binu opened the flask and poured out tea. "Sir," he called. Ramesh opened his eyes. The crowd was growing thicker around him. Binu whispered in his ear, "Lot of rice is selling, everything can be caught but not right here. There is a strategic point beyond the market, a narrow depressed lane leading to a thatched house. There we can wait. From there it would be almost like shooting a tiger from a machan." Binu smiled.

All of them went there. Ramesh sat on a chair. Binu left saying, "Let me now go and give final touches to the operation."

Ramesh kept sitting. A little further away on an elevation on the hill-slope was a Kondh *bustee*. *Charpoys* were spread out in the open. Dogs waited near men, wagging their tails. Some kids were beating a huge drum to their heart's content. On a doorstep an old man sat vomiting. An old lady anxiously caressed his back. Must be malarial fever. A goat stood on heaps of broken walls and munched the twigs of some tree. Time flew by as Ramesh kept his eyes fastened on that scene. He wiped the sweat from his body, tried to take out the dust of the market from his nostrils. The day was drawing to a close, shadows lengthened in the late winter sun and the picture of an ordinary *bustee* with its simple every day world lay spread out in that faded background.

Suddenly somebody started weeping. People ran out of all houses and rushed to that house from where the weeping came. In front of the house and at the doorsteps in no time there was a crowd. Scratching their cheeks and beating their chests they all wept bitterly. Gradually it transformed itself into a rhythmic, piteous fury, a chorus of death-music.

"Alas! Alas! He is dead, he is dead." Binu came back, almost from now here. "I have arranged everything, Sir. The *paiks* were in the market. I have asked them to drive all the smugglers here."

"What happened there, Binu?"

"Nothing very much, Sir. Somebody is dead. Must be out of hill-fever. Nothing new in that." Bum kept standing behind Ramesh. Ramesh kept listening to that weeping. Ever new, ever old. And the wheel turned, life, death, reproduction. Every picture melted and changed. In his mind's eye floated his village Kantipur in North Balasore. His home, parents, neighbours, known old men, known children and known girls; all the distance from the burning-ghat to the centre of the village, to the place of Chandi. Death, life, regeneration. There too lived men who loved peace and tranquillity, who had no quarrel with life and who suffered pain even though doing no harm to others.

The refrain of the chorus of the death-song continued.

So many had gone earlier, so many. On dark nights the villagers light up torches of fire and invoke them, "Come back in darkness, return in light."

The vast plain of death lay ahead of him. There, language and country did not divide. All were equal and eternal.

Standing behind, Binu too thought of his home, his youngest wife. Would Bisi be coming? Suddenly he slapped his own cheeks. Ramesh looked at him. Binu was rubbing his cheek with his palm. "This place is full of very big mosquitoes. Their bite is very painful," he added.

Ramesh was startled. He could see himself lying on bed, shivering. Eyes bloodshot, body dark as a bear. It would start at 103 degrees temperature and make one feel like

biting, abusing, running mad. Vomiting, heat, mounting heat and then? Birth, death, reproduction, birth, death.

Law does not come to the mind. Birth, death, man. As if he suddenly saw everything with new eyes! Men walked, many men, getting lost in the dark. But the stream did not die. It flowed on and on. The market was coming to a close. Men were moving. He felt he knew everybody, all these people, in person. Pressure of wants at home, oppression of life outside. And yet they moved on. Caste and language did not matter. They were men. His villagers, known men. In the unending stream an ant looked up to other ants, an ineffable smile flowed from its dried-up eyes as it seemed to say: "We are brothers, we walk on our feet and work with our hands: we belong to the same land, this ancient earth under the sky. Our enemy is common: those who snatch away the little food from our mouths, crush us to death and heap hot ashes and cinders on us."

The rows of ants moved on. In the depth of Ramesh's mind the unextinguished lamp of smile and fire continued to burn.

Suddenly there was commotion outside. The *paiks* were coming, followed by men carrying baskets and bags. In a moment Ramesh was transformed into his official self, stood up and accepted the salute of the *paiks*. Binu rushed forward and said, "They are being dragged here in groups."

The *paiks* said, "Kindly see, Sir, how these fellows were smuggling away rice from this market to the plains below. The baskets and bags have only a top dressing of chillies, turmeric and tobacco but below these there is rice. They will sell the smuggled rice at exorbitant rates. For a handful of rice, they will eat up the flesh and blood of men."

Ramesh looked again. An army of skeletons stood facing him.

Ribs showed as iron shafts of a hoeing machine, skins dangled on the ribs as on a bat's body, the bodies all twisted, bent, only heaps of oil-less hair on the head and tiny flickering eyes. Were they men or the ghosts of men? Entreating in their strange language; now weeping, now pointing to their cavelike bellies and mouths, now dangling their slender, weak, twig-like hands. In the *bustee* on the other side, the dead body was brought out of the house. Presently men were jostling about, throwing their heads forward and weeping in a chorus, "Alas! Alas! Who snatched you away? Who ate you up?"

And down there in the narrow lane below the *bustee*, the living ghosts entreated and prayed, beating their chests and heads: "Oh God Almighty, Oh father." The *paiks* roared, and Binu shouted, "No, no, that will not do. Open up the bags, show the rice."

Ramesh closed his eyes, something tottered and crashed inside him. The exhaustion and hunger of the long trek closed in and submerged him. Eyes shut, he could only see the confused, crazy, co-mingling sea of men, 'yaws' on the cheeks, smile on the face, shrivelled skin on the body and glitter in the eyes. Everything was mixed up, inseparable; the piteous wailings for the dead, the heart-rending cry of deprivation and poverty, the fire and storm raging in the caves below the eyes. He opened his eyes and looked; the cry was continuing. "Have pity, Sir, have mercy almighty, see our condition." Before him stood a tall skeleton of a man, almost made of dried palm-leaf. Two long hands went up, joined in salutation and then slowly drooped down. They could crumble to pieces anytime! An empty, hoarse voice entreated, prayed, "Have pity, my father." What was the language? Ramesh did not know. But the meaning went in. Prostrate on the ground and stretched right up to his feet that shadowy figure raised its head and the eyes looked Ramesh straight in the face. That look took the shape of the look of some known person, known

to Ramesh, known to all. It went out of every person when hunger struck and looked quizzically as if from a mirror. Ramesh felt he knew all these people intimately, like his villagers. No longer he was seeing their shapes and forms; the intimacy of their inner self overpowered him. That shape just before him was his long-dead 'Sapana' uncle, the same dishevelled hair, the madman's unshaven face, those gaping pits on the thresholds of the bones. Only he looked more tired, more hungry, more frightened by the terrible vision of death. That other old man, moustached, all bent and crooked, was none other than the hapless blacksmith of Kantipur village!

And those urchins with only skin and bone! Were they not his village boys who had entered his garden and ate up all the raw guavas? And those women looking like tattered, frail, leaking boats? Were they not his village womenfolk rushing to collect fallen dry leaves for fuel early in the morning? Ramesh tried to hide his eyes, hanging down his head. Only, his brief murmuring words could be heard, "Go, go away."

Binu could hardly believe what this Officer was saying. Did he seriously mean it? Anxiously he entreated, "Sir, but Sir." But Ramesh only repeated, "Leave them. It is getting late. Go away, go."

Binu groped in his memory for the image of authority. Certainly it was not like this: this young boy, soft and kindhearted, hardly knew the world. Moustaches just sprouting, slim, with a delicate voice. Hardly an officer, he concluded. Real authority was like tiger. Binu had seen many down the years. In his twisted lips there was a strange expression. Partly in smile, partly in ridicule.

Ramesh kept standing. Before his consciousness there was no more any history. Time had ended. There was no Kapilendradev, no Purushottam, no Konarak. There was no special distinctive image of the men who form the backbone of a country or a nation. History was devoid of

sense, meaning. There was nothing but ants, ants, ants; everywhere, hungry ants carrying mouthfuls of food to live, to survive and the stream of ants, converging on ant-heaps for a new lease of precarious life. The ant wanted to live. Ramesh felt a cold shudder. The brief sun shine of late winter had faded. All around a thin layer of blue haze was spreading. It was evening. He felt the cold of *Magh* month inside.

*Translated from Odia by Sitakant Mahapatra*



## ALL ALONE

*Kartar Singh Duggal*

*M*ay 15, 2.00 p.m.  
Three five, three five, three five.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
Yes.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
Miss Hashmi speaking.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
Yes, Yasmin Hashmi.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
Who? I am afraid, I haven not...  
...      ...      ...      ...  
Oh yes.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
I will call Bhaijan... But Bhaijan is out.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
He is gone to the airport.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
I will tell him that Mr. Malik rang up.  
...      ...      ...      ...  
Yes, Salim Malik.  
...      ...      ...      ...

15, New Queen Road, I know.  
...      ...      ...

Yes, yes.  
...      ...      ...

Daddy is away on tour.  
...      ...      ...

Mummy is in the nursing home for the last so many  
days.  
...      ...      ...

No, she may have to be operated upon.  
...      ...      ...

Alone! Why, there are servants.  
...      ...      ...

No, thank you.  
...      ...      ...

Yes, yes.  
...      ...      ...

Ya.  
...      ...      ...

Good afternoon.  
...      ...      ...

Yes.  
...      ...      ...

O.K.  
...      ...      ...

I will tell him.  
...      ...      ...

Good aft...  
...      ...      ...

Yes.  
...      ...      ...

Yes, I understand  
...      ...      ...

Good after...  
...      ...      ...

Yes, certainly.  
...      ...      ...

Good afternoon.

May 15, 3.10 p.m.

Three five, three five, three five.

... ... ... ...

Yes.

... ... ... ...

Yasmin Hashmi.

... ... ... ...

Thank you so much.

... ... ... ...

I am not alone at all. All the servants are there—my maid, then the bearer, the cook....

... ... ... ...

And Bhajan should be here any moment.

... ... ... ...

One of his old class-fellows is going abroad.

... ... ... ...

What?

... ... ... ...

Oh yes, you are also his classmate.

... ... ... ...

I do remember, though I was very young then.

... ... ... ...

Well, you can never tell about daddy. He should take a week or ten days. He left only this morning.

... ... ... ...

Mummy? It depends upon the surgeon. They are still taking tests one after the other.

... ... ... ...

Yes, the summer this year has been rather severe. It has been frightfully hot the last seven days. I do not think it has ever been so hot in these parts.

... ... ... ...

Only our bed rooms are air-conditioned. Not the gallery.

... ... ... ...

The telephone is in the gallery.

... ... ... ...



Yes.

No, not at all.

Adab.

No, thank you.

No.

Ada...

No, thank you very much.

Adab arz!

May 15, 3.20 p.m.

Three five, three five, three five.

Yes, Yasmin Hashmi speaking.

My voice is hoarse?

May be, I was shouting for the maid-servant.

Yes, the servants retire to their quarters in the afternoon. The maid-servant stays back. She, too, has disappeared today. She must be around. Poor thing, she lost her husband last month.

No, not alone at all.

Bhaijan should be returning. He knows I am alone.

Yes, it is beastly hot today. The rains are a far cry. The monsoons have not arrived at Bombay yet.

OK, Bhaijan has, perhaps, come.

...      ...      ...      ...  
No, it was someone else's car, the same colour as our Fiat. She has entered the neighbour's bungalow. Your Fiat is cream-coloured, isn't it? It's my favourite colour.

...      ...      ...      ...  
Yours also? Really? How wonderful!

...      ...      ...      ...  
I do not know why Bhaijan is taking so long.

...      ...      ...      ...  
What, he will come after two hours? How do you know?

...      ...      ...      ...  
The plane is late? Another two hours! My goodness! I had asked him to ring up and check up with the airport. He said, this flight is never delayed.

...      ...      ...      ...  
No, it was not the maid-servant. It was my book, it slipped from my hand.

...      ...      ...      ...  
It is a novel...Moravia's.

...      ...      ...      ...  
Yes, *Empty Canvas*. Have you read it? I have just started it. The maid-servant was away and I thought all alone I might...

...      ...      ...      ...  
What? Fear? In one's own house?

...      ...      ...      ...  
My voice is fear-stricken? No, not at all.

...      ...      ...      ...  
My maid-servant has fed me from her breasts when I was a baby. She has virtually brought me up. Mummy, as you know, has been keeping indifferent health all these years.

...      ...      ...      ...  
She must be somewhere here. She should come any moment. Poor thing is miserable. She is left all alone.

No, why must you bother? If nothing else, I will ring up Laila. We talk for hours on telephone. I like talking on telephone.

... ... ... ...

You too!

... ... ... ...

One of your photographs is in our...no, Bhaijan's album. You are standing in a group, right in the middle, tallest of all.

... ... ... ...

Its an old photograph? So what? Bhaijan's all friends are there... Someone is coming, Adab!

... ... ... ...

No, it was a cat. She has caught a rat, the blood dripping from her mouth, she has jumped across the boundary wall.

... ... ... ...

Is someone calling you?

... ... ... ...

OK. Adab!

... ... ... ...

*May 15, 3.25 p.m.*

Hello!

... ... ... ...

Is Laila there?

... ... ... ...

May I talk to her?

... ... ... ...

I am Yasmin this end.

... ... ... ...

Hello, Laila, How are you?

... ... ... ...

I was all alone, I thought I will ring you up.

... ... ... ...

How very hot it is today!

... ... ... ...

I do not know what's happening to me. The maid-servant has suddenly disappeared somewhere. Bhaijan has gone to the airport. Daddy is on tour. And Mummy, as you know, is in the nursing home.

...      ...      ...      ...

Oh! are you expecting a call?

...      ...      ...      ...

Whose?

...      ...      ...      ...

I see.

...      ...      ...      ...

God! You mean I should ring off?

...      ...      ...      ...

All right, but tell me what was the name of Akbar's son?

...      ...      ...      ...

Yes, Salim, I thought as much.

...      ...      ...      ...

OK, I am disconnecting, Bye!

...      ...      ...      ...

*May 15, 3.45 p.m.*

Hello, I am trying 357912 for the last 15 minutes. The telephone seems to be out of order.

...      ...      ...      ...

What, it is engaged

...      ...      ...      ...

Engaged for fifteen minutes!

...      ...      ...      ...

Good heavens!

*May 15.3.48 p.m.*

Hello, may I talk to Shammi?

...      ...      ...      ...

She has gone to see a movie?

...      ...      ...      ...

At this hour?

...      ...      ...      ...

Thank you. I will call back later.

...      ...      ...

May 15, 3.49 p.m.

Hello, Shanta, I am Yasmin.

...      ...      ...

How are you?

...      ...      ...

Not seen for many days. Have you received his letter?

...      ...      ...

Your daddy is sitting close to the telephone, is it?

...      ...      ...

OK, I will ring up again.

...      ...      ...

May 15, 3.51 p.m.

Time please?

...      ...      ...

May 15, 3.52 p.m.

Time please?

...      ...      ...

May 15, 3.53 p.m.

Time please?

...      ...      ...

May 15, 3.54 p.m.

Time please?

...      ...      ...

May 15, 3.55 p.m.

Time please?

...      ...      ...

May 15, 4.00 p.m.

Hello !

...      ...      ...      ...

Yes sir.

...      ...      ...      ...

I am the maid-servant, Sir.

...      ...      ...      ...

There is no one in the house, Sir.

...      ...      ...      ...

Yasmin Bibi has high fever, Sir. She is lying unconscious in the bed.

...      ...      ...      ...

Sir, I had gone out for a little while. When I returned I found the Radio was put on full, blast. Nobody puts on the Radio in our house like that. The time-piece on the mantle piece had been smashed on the floor. And Yasmin Bibi was lying unconscious in her bed.

...      ...      ...      ...

Sir, I can not understand, what has happened to her. I left her hale and hearty a little while ago.

...      ...      ...      ...

I think it is an evil spirit.

...      ...      ...      ...

Are you coming?

...      ...      ...      ...

But who are you, Sir? I am sorry, I did not recognize your voice.

...      ...      ...      ...

From New Queen Road, a friend of Chhote Sa'ab?

...      ...      ...      ...

Alright, Sir.

*Translated from Punjabi by the author*



## PRECAUTION!

*Vijay Dan Detha*

A jackal and his mate lived in a jungle, their home a neatly nurtured burrow. A pond of clean water was there only four fields away. The jungle abounded in berry-bushes. They selected the best fruit to eat. Every comfort and bliss within easy reach. They expressed extreme love for each other. Each was ready to lay down life on even the reflection of the other. The she jackal's professed devotion to her mate was more than what Sita had for Lord Ram. She would not let even a mosquito, fly or a bug touch the jackal. Her eulogies made the jackal blush. But her praise encouraged the jackal to boast off—his tail cracking like a whip. At its sound the lion rolled away seven times, till at last the big cat put a straw between its teeth and pleaded to be forgiven. Now the jackal was the king of the jungle. Even a leaf would not move if he wished otherwise. Once, in a fury, he hit a sand-dune and it got scattered like a toy. His howls made the clouds burst. His spouse felt proud of her mate's prowess.

Once at midnight she was thirsty and she shook the jackal out of sleep and urged him to escort her to the pond. The jackal still feeling sleepy murmured, "I can not

even turn sides to shake off this soothing sleep. You may go alone....”

She disapprovingly said, “How could a female like me go all by herself?”

“Who is there (in this wilderness) to molest you?”

She replied with dignity “What do you males know of the female compulsions. I will not let even wind and the sun touch me if I could. But I am helpless.” The jackal reluctant to wake up blurted, “Where’s helplessness in it? My reputation is at least there for your safety. As for the sun and wind I would tangle them up so inextricably like the bushes that they had never be the same.”

“But first you escort me; I can not even talk properly not with a parched throat”.

At last her coaxing persuaded the jackal to go with her. The sky dazzled with the full moon. The berries of all hues shone in the bushes. The whole forest was sleeping soundly in the lap of moonlight. The she-jackal looked at the moon. It was gorgeous! Fascinating! Even a horde of jackals would not match its grandeur.

The jackal stood on the bank of the pond. The she-jackal went ahead and drank from the pond to quench her thirst. As she raised her head she knew of the crookedness of the moon. Hiding under water the moon had been kissing her. These males are all so libidinous. Braving the winter, she dived into the pond. How could a devoted wife guard her dignity with all these lascivious males around!

Turning angrily to her mate, she complained, “What are you gazing at! This rascal, the moon is trying hard to kiss me! The moon would have hugged me, had you not escorted me.”

Her spouse could not get head or tail of what she was trying to put across to him! Grinding his teeth in anger, he asked, “Who? This pale moon? How dare it? I will batter it to pieces if you so wish!”

Saying this the jackal gesticulated, striking a blow with his paw like a lion as though the moon was to be done away with instantly. The she-jackal once again raised her head and gazed at the moon. The moon too was restless to stare at her. How gorgeous! How fascinating! She did not want the jackal to take any drastic action and advised him, "Let it alone! Or else the whole world will suffer for this lascivious moon. Children will be frightened to move about in the dark!"

The jackal brought down his paw with even more ferocity "Do not stop me, let me reduce this moon to pulp of a moonlet, if you like!"

She held his hand in her own and said, "Let it go. Why should you take the blame of eternal darkness?"

The jackal was pacified after repeated entreaties from his spouse. Otherwise the world would have had it.

On their way back to their dwelling the she-jackal impressed upon the jackal that one's dignity and one's precautions are to be maintained by oneself after all. Let the moon strut as it does. Once inside the burrow, she never peeped out that night.

The jackal entered his dwelling still grinding his teeth in rage. The she-jackal kept contemplating over her beauty and could not sleep for a long while! She could get up only about a couple of hours after sunrise and came out rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. The sun was waiting restlessly to admire her beauty. All these damned males are alike, all Cupid's cousins! But the sun is dazzling bright. It enlightens the whole world! See, is it not as vicious as the moon? She was not thirsty but pressed upon the jackal to escort her. The jackal with a bit of irritation retorted, "Foolish woman, what are you afraid of in broad day light? Go alone boldly."

The she-jackal argued, "If the great gods like the moon can try to lure others with bad intentions, whom should we trust?"

Her repeated solicitations compelled the jackal to go with her. Whenever she cast slanting glances, she found the sun viewing her closely!

On reaching the verge of the pond, she noticed that the sun had dived into the water. What do these males get by violating the dignity of women? She prepared to drink from the pond but shrugged back. She looked at her lord and complained, "What I feared has come true! This sun seems to be crazier than the moon. It is full of lust in broad daylight!"

The jackal was on her side in a wink. Infuriated, he asked, "Where...? Where...?"

She pointed at the reflection of the sun playing on the ripples of water and said, "It is there! The wicked one!"

Now, the jackal's rage was out of bound. Bringing down his paw like a lion, he said, "If you like, I can dismember this loafer into tiny bits right now!"

Once again, the she jackal controlled her ire and counseled, "Leave him alone! The whole world shall have to suffer from our action. It will forever grope in dark! There will be eternal chaos and distress!"

The jackal had great turmoil inside. Enraged even more, he assured, "No, no, if you like I can swallow this vainglorious sun like a berry! Lick it like a slice of watermelon!"

The she-jackal held his paw and implored, "Forgive him! Be kind! The world would curse you. Why should you take on yourself the blame of the chaos in vain?"

The jackal in his excitement blasted, "How, in vain? Is it a sin to spare a loafer of this order! Now see what I do..."

"I do not wish to see anything now. If I do, the whole world will never be able to see anything! Pacify yourself. One must take precaution and preserve one's own dignity! You know, one's own dignity! You just watch this villain while I quench my thirst."

At last the jackal took her advice. He watched with his gaze fixed on the sun. His looks so scared the sun that it just stood there unmoved!

The she-jackal took her time to drink from the pond while she let the sun kiss her. She had never before drank from the pond with such satiety. Thirst is not within one's control. Every night she goaded the jackal to escort her to the pond. The jackal gazed at the movement of the moon! Now the she-jackal fondly enjoyed the kisses of the sun and the moon as she quenched her thirst. One's own precaution to protect one's dignity is all!

*Translated by Madan Mohan Mathur from the Rajasthani original,  
"Savecheti," Vijay Dan Detha Ri Sirai Kathavan*



## MISJUDGEMENT

*Pandita Kshama Rao*

The month was *Chaitra* and the time evening. In one of the posh mansions in Mazgaum, a Bombay suburb, the preliminaries of house decoration in connection with a daughter's marriage were in full swing. The large building was bursting with various sounds: those of the melodious chants of priests conducting the auspicious ceremony, of workmen chiselling the marble stones and digging a foundation for the marriage *pandal*, of servant-folk shouting at each other, and of people bustling about noisily. Only the previous day, the engagement of the daughter of this house with a rich bridegroom had been settled by the elders.

This bride was just twenty years old, slender in build, short-statured, sweet-voiced though reticent in speech, not so pretty, though fair in complexion, with eyes sparkling like fish, though her name was its opposite, Amina (literally, 'not fish'). She was seen conversing with her friend Sarala, a simple-natured girl, true to her name, in a corner of

the mango-grove beside the side-entrance of her father's mansion, as the sun-god was setting in the west.

Sarala: Oh my dear friend. What precisely is the time fixed for your wed-ding tomorrow?

Amina: At sunset.

Sarala: (*jocularly*) What is this my dear, how is it you have agreed to marry even without seeing the would-be bridegroom?

Amina: What use is there in seeing? In our country most brides get married to men before seeing them. Look at my mother. She had hardly stepped out of her childhood when she went out to live with my father whom she never had a chance of seeing before marriage. But I am twenty years old. I depend upon my parents for everything and whole-heartedly obey their bidding. Without any hesitation, I shall marry the bridegroom they have chosen for me.

Sarala: Look! Had you known the bridegroom before marriage, you could have been more confident about your future happiness.

So saying, Sarala bent down a little, collected a few full-bloomed *bakul* flowers and started smelling their sweet scent.

Amina: Yes! Ideas like love-marriage are feasible only in a western society. In western countries, even among couples married for love, we frequently hear of divorce because of promiscuity, mutual discord and so on. But in our country such instances are very rare.

These two girls had been neighbours since their childhood. They had been brought up differently and educated differently. Their family customs were different in many respects just as their religions too were different. Yet their friendship had become deep-rooted and strong over the years. Though Amina had been sent to a girls' school, she never knew the joy of freedom. Lacking a

strong personality of her own, without even a thought of her own, she could not have any say in the matter of her marriage. Her parents had fixed it with Hamid, the wealthy owner of an industrial factory. The bridegroom was also a resident of Bombay. For that matter, this guileless girl would have agreed to marry any bridegroom at her father's bidding.

The next day, Amina's house was festive with music and dance as a part of the preparations for the marriage. The guests were welcomed, served rich food and entertained with *nautch* girls and the music of top singers till midnight. After the marriage ceremony in the early morning, the bride came out smeared all over with scents and unguents, clad in-white silk, crested with white flowers and wearing ornaments of diamonds set in gold, like necklace, earrings and bracelet. The newly married bride found it difficult to part from her friend Sarala. Before she left her father's place, Amina promised to write a letter to her daily, to be delivered by a messenger; and this promise she kept. She wrote describing colourfully the lovely seaside mansion of her husband, its enchanting splendour with its rows of innumerable electric lights decoratively arranged and its retinue of men in colourful and unique uniforms, its inner apartments breathing the scent of diverse flowers, the elegance of her own gold and diamond jewellery, the many motor-vehicles Hamid owned and the numerous horses in his stable. All this she proudly described at length in her letters, but she had not even a word to say about her husband. Yet Sarala did not make any enquiry about Hamid. And in Amina's mind memories of her childhood friend Sarala came again and again as she walked about her husband's posh bungalow. Amina felt she was like a parrot fledgling lost in the forest, its mother dead, and flying desperately from tree to tree.

Indeed, this mansion was built of rare and costly stones. In the inner hall was a flight of steps supported by massive green pillars and leading into the women's apartments. The walls were adorned with paintings which had remained there from the times of the great Mughals, displaying the excellent skill of the artists reaching almost celestial perfection. The floor of the apartment was covered with costly Persian carpets. The walls were decorated with embroidered silk curtains. In her mother's house Amina had wondered about her marriage: "I hope my marriage with the wealthy Hamid will bring me happiness. But how will I ever be able to pass time alone in such a vast mansion."

In the beginning Amina felt very disconsolate as she had no work to do. Her husband would leave home early in the morning for work to his factory some six miles away, and would return only about the time of sunset. In the complete seclusion of that mansion this young lady had to pass time with difficulty; now chewing betel leaves, now getting her feet massaged by servant maids, now enjoying the breeze of the electric ceiling fans turning round and round above her head, and congratulating herself on her good fortune. But she was completely bereft of all company except that of ignorant servants. There was no intelligent friend to talk to. Bent down by the weight of her many glittering ornaments, her hair glistening with scented oil, her eyes dyed with collyrium, and clad in costly garments lined with golden threads, she would either enjoy the cool sea-breeze wafting moist drops of the ocean waves or listen to the sounds of parrots and other pet birds or walk endlessly to and fro in the hall from one apartment to another. This way Amina passed her time until she became a mother of twin sons.

A few years later Amina's childhood friend Sarala married a youth, dependable as well as good-natured,

Their marriage was celebrated without much fanfare. Sarala's husband commuted daily to Bombay from a suburb for his work and had no permanent residence in the city. In due course he decided to settle down in the city; and acting on the counsel of Sarala, he obtained on rent a small flat with two or three rooms on the ground floor of Amina's mansion. In this huge building, even long-standing tenants lived without knowing each other. Sarala's flat was exactly opposite the high window of Amina's bedroom portico on the first floor. One could see distinctly her bedroom through the thin muslin curtains. When Sarala's husband was away from the city on tour, she would pass most of her day in that flat of her bosom friend Amina. The two friends were exceedingly happy at their reunion.

Amina, following the traditional custom of her religion, wore *purdah* and stayed in seclusion. Rarely did she go out. She was unaware of society and of her close neighbours too. But in course of time, she mothered many children and was supremely happy with herself. Whenever Sarala started talking of her boundless happiness in marriage, of the sweet company of her dear husband, of each other's longings when they were apart, Amina's looks would become vacant and desultory. In due course Sarala detected a streak of sadness in Amina's eyes. On seeing, day after day, Sarala and her husband walking hand-in-hand with great intimacy on the seashore adjoining their flats, Amina's sadness grew more intense.

With a deep sigh, she once started angrily chiding her heart: "How foolish you are to sigh now like this!" In the course of a whole day she had no more than a few moments of joy in seeing her husband's face. Hamid was a big gambler and given to entertainment in many clubs; and as the days passed, he was more and more late in returning home. Every night Amina would be waiting

anxiously for his return. At last, gradually, when the time of his return came to be extended up to the early hours of the morning, Hamid said to Amina: "Don't wait for me. Have your dinner at the right time and go to bed, I shall be dining with friends." Although Amina was anxious to know the real reason for his delay, she did not have the courage to ask him point-blank: "Why are you so late in coming home nowadays?" When their marital relationship thus came to be a thing of the past, she began looking upon him only as the father of her children. Amina really believed that this was the pitiable lot of all women, of even intelligent women, due to circumstances. Hence, though she never knew even in her dreams the pure joy of conjugal love, she did not think even once that her lot was exceptionally pitiable.

One day in her sleep Amina dreamt a very bad dream. She dreamt that her childhood friend, Sarala, had robbed her of everything and driven her out of Hamid's mansion. She woke up with a cry as if lashed by a tempest, rubbed her eyes, and found that her voice had died in her throat. In a flurry she moved her slinking body to the nearby window with faltering steps and stood there long staring at Sarala's flat down below. Amina was depressed because of her total seclusion and the continuous drone of waves only increased her depression. Her spirits were drooping like a crushed lotus creeper and she was most in need of consolation by somebody dear to her heart. As she was looking on, she saw lights switched on in Sarala's bedroom. Peering behind the transparent window curtain of that room, Amina saw Sarala's slender form moving from side to side. "When her husband is away on tour, what can Sarala be doing at the dead of night?" Amina wondered. Just then, when she was about to call out to her friend, Amina saw the form of a man resembling Hamid moving from the back of Sarala's house. At that very moment, the

light in Sarala's bed-room was switched off. For an instant Amina could not believe that this man moving so silently and furtively was her own husband; but when he opened the front door of her mansion and entered straight, she was convinced that he could be none other than Hamid. Her face lost colour and became pale, her body trembled and she remained stunned. In a short while it would be daybreak! Why was her husband so late in his return? Why was Sarala's bedroom lighted at midnight? Such doubts assailed Amina's mind.

The next night, though Amina stood again for long at her window, she found Sarala's house completely shrouded in darkness. Peace reigned supreme around the place. The moon was shining like a *tilak* mark on the lovely forehead of the bride, night; and its rays were like jets of milk washing the earth white. At regular intervals, the gentle roar of the ocean waves filled the ears of Amina. No sooner had she turned back from the window than she heard a sound somewhat like that of one moving outside the window. Before long, her eyes caught sight of Hamid's bodily form moving out of the mansion's ground floor. Thrown over his snow-white dress was a dark silken shawl and his head sported a red Turkish cap. All these contrasts in colour stood out brightly in the moonlight. All the darkness was swept out of her by the bright flood of moonlight pouring in from the window. Her own bedstead glittered as if it were fashioned out of sea-foam. All that Amina could do at that time was to sit up on her bed, her face downcast, and let out hot sighs full of doubt and anger.

For five consecutive nights Amina continued her night-watch and this was enough to convince her that Sarala had betrayed her. She became quite certain that there was not a shred of doubt regarding the secret affair between Sarala and Hamid. Every night she would witness this spectacle and become red with rage. Her lips would throb and her

eyes would burn. Helplessly, she would lie in bed, rolling from side to side. "Oh, what a fool I have been! How long I have remained unaware of Sarala's secret betrayal!" She would scold herself again and again.

As usual, when Sarala arrived at her residence one day to do embroidery, Amina remained very moody, boiling with rage within herself. Sarala thought her friend was upset by some household squabble, and tried to raise her spirits with jokes. But Amina only became more morose. When Sarala tried to read aloud from a book, Amina stopped her firmly with her hand more than once. Whenever Sarala attempted some intimate conversation with her, Amina showed her displeasure clearly. Thereupon Sarala remembered the wise adage, "Too much familiarity breeds contempt", and stopped her visits to Amina's mansion.

However, the fire of jealousy and hatred rankling in Amina's heart was gaining in intensity. Often she thought: "How could the very person in whom I placed full and implicit trust ever since childhood take the initiative in such a horrid affair, that too, with her own friend's husband? How she has deceived me from behind, talking such sweet words to my face! Oh, what a wretch she is! All this time she has been presenting herself to me as a pure lotus, as autumnal moonlight, as a paragon of chastity described in legends! And yet all the time she has been so foul! Poor me, I treated her only as a trustworthy, bosom friend and sister! Has she become so enamoured of Hamid's riches that she could blandly betray even her own dearest husband without a thought? Alas, what breach of faith! Oh, what a fickle mind she has! What misfortune that I have been made an object of pity for one and all, that too by my own bosom friend! Oh, how I failed to notice all these days her sensual infatuation! Oh, why did she take up residence near my place? Was she plotting from the outset to commit adultery in secret during her husband's

absence? How could such a black cobra find a place in her heart?" Doubt and distrust gnawed at her heart like thorns. Although she wanted to question Sarala in detail about this matter, she chose to remain quiet because of her false pride. Sarala's long friendship and sweet talk now appeared to Amina as no more than a dream, a magic show, an illusion! And yet she remained outwardly calm, keeping her heartache within herself.

Years later, when Sarala heard that one of Amina's children was seriously ill, she wrote affectionately to Amina offering assistance to her friend in nursing the child. But Amina sent the letter back with the messenger without even showing the courtesy of opening the cover. This made Sarala feel very bad; yet she never said or did anything against her friend. She remained calm and contented herself by making enquiries about the sick child and Amina through her own servant.

After the lapse of another year, Hamid was stricken with an incurable and fatal disease. In course of time, he lost his senses and his speech; and knowing that his end was near, he pointed his finger in the direction of Sarala's house and dumbly suggested by gestures his last wish that someone from that house should be called. Though Amina understood his desire, she did not comply with it as she disapproved of his relations with another's wife. In her mind Sarala's figure loomed menacingly like death's shadow.

A few days later, Hamid expired at the time of sunset. The news of his death spread at once to all the neighbours and in no time to the entire city. It was not that Amina was overwhelmed by sorrow at her husband's demise; but she was shocked by the suddenness of it and she remained motionless in her bedroom. She was aroused by the sound of servants scurrying and the loud laments of old attendants. Her children, seized with commotion and

fright, ran into their mother's bedroom. Warmly fondling them with embraces and consoling them with sweet words, the mother put them to sleep in her own bed. When they were asleep, Hamid's man-servant approached her silently and said: "The master's body is washed, perfumed and scented with unguents, etc. Soon the citizens will be arriving here to express their condolence; and they will take away master's anointed body to the ground-floor to arrange for the funeral. The priests have already arrived." Hearing this, she dismissed the man by saying: "I shall be coming out soon." Desiring to take a last look at her husband, Amina hastened out of her apartment. Passing along the several well-lit passages in the mansion, she reached at last Hamid's bedroom adjacent to the big staircase, where a broad flight of steps led downstairs. As she was about to open the bedroom door she saw Sarala slowly ascending the flight of steps from below. On seeing her, the widow stood aghast right there her body shivering apparently in the cool breeze blowing then.

Even as Sarala with a downcast face stretched out her arms to embrace lovingly her friend in distress in a gesture of sympathy, Amina pushed her away with her hands, shouting in a harsh tone: "Indeed, you have come now to have a last look at your lover!" Sarala averred her innocence by shaking her head and stating: "No, no! I have come now only for your sake!" With these words, she went away. Without replying to Sarala, Amina opened the door of her husband's bedroom and saw there a beautiful, strange woman, golden in complexion. On seeing her, Amina began to cry. "How come this? Who is she? Why is she here? Oh, alas!" These were the questions she mumbled in a trembling voice. Amina stood there dazed, with gaping eyes, as if transfixed to the spot. She noticed that the young woman was kneeling beside Hamid's bed and mourning silently, her body draped in black muslin.

She had a handsome face, fair complexion and a body as tender as a fresh creeper. Her head was laid down at his feet and she appeared to be burning in the fire of sorrow. Sarala saw that Amina's question concerned this woman and whispered into her ear: "O friend, indeed it is very natural that this woman should be in such a sorrow-stricken state for the sake of her lover who is no more! I think you know how they loved each other for long. All the neighbours here are aware of this." "Is it so? Since how long has this been going on? I was thinking all the time that you were his beloved", gasped Amina indistinctly. Sarala was flabbergasted and for a moment her eyes gaped wide as if she could not understand the meaning of Amina's words. At length, seeing Amina's face from which all colour had gone, she said quickly: "O foolish woman! Just as you have been blessed by fate with all the earthly treasures and riches, so have I also been blessed with the singular happiness of a husband's exclusive and abundant love. All men, other than my loving husband, are but brothers to me." When Sarala finished saying this, Amina bent down her face with shame and remained silent. After a moment, on recovering her self-possession, Sarala said: "Now I have come to know the reason for your prejudiced and poisoned attitude towards me. All these five years you have been heavily piling up on your innocent, childhood friend ghost-like doubts created by your own foolish imaginings; you have banished her from your sight for no reason; and you have troubled yourself with evil thoughts without any point. Human behaviour is grounded in speech. Truth and falsehood can be ascertained only when people speak to one another. If only you had asked me straight, you would have known the truth long ago. But oh, how sad; you have been wrongly nursing the suspicion against me in your heart secretly, burning with the fire of jealousy at an imagined betrayal, cursing me in your

heart all this time. Drowned in a flood of silent tears, you have been like a deer smelt and hunted by the tiger of a terrible anger, born of suspicion. Surely, your husband's action was not proper. But it is known to you also that according to Islamic law, it is quite legal for a man to take a second wife, even when the first is alive."

Hearing this, Amina fell at the feet of Sarala, her words faltering very low in tone, overcome by shame. She folded her hands in a gesture expressive of her mixed emotions. She said: "Oh my dear friend! Please pardon me. Though I had my husband, I lived somehow all along as though I were without my husband since he was estranged. With my husband's death I once again revert to my former state. There is not much difference indeed for me between the two states. But my childhood friend estranged from me so long has fortunately come back to me. This is indeed the return of sunshine in my life. It would be a formality to say that I am exceedingly happy. Amen! Let us live together the rest of our lives as best friends." Then Amina embraced Sarala warmly and took her into her bedroom.

*Translated by K. Krishnamoorthy from the Sanskrit original  
"Mithyagrahanam".*



# NIGHT BUS TO BENGAL<sup>1</sup>

*Sunder Manoj Hembrom*

A large crowd of Santhals have been gathering at the Dumka bus depot, some with bags, some with bundles and some with their children, mostly infants and toddlers. The last bus to Bengal will be leaving at nine that night. It will go up to Kolkata city but the Santhals, who are migrating as agricultural labourers to Bengal, will be getting down at Bardhaman. They have been waiting at the bus depot since afternoon. Perhaps they missed the day bus... but why did they miss, it? Perhaps the bus was so packed that they had to wait for the night bus. There is always a shortage of buses in the Dumka bus depot but not of travel agents. These *dikus*<sup>2</sup> have spread over this

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- 1 The original story in Santhali titled "Ado Cedak,...?" was first published in *Jug Sirijol: Monthly Literary and Cultural Journal in Santhali*, February 2012, pp. 9–12, and later republished (with some modifications) in the author's book, *Sengel Buru: Dobatiare Seterakan Sandia! Sornaj reak' Kahniko*. The Santhali Literary and Cultural Society, Kolkata, 2013. This translation is based on the second version.
- 2 *Diku* (or *deko*) is a term applied by many tribal/adivasi groups of Jharkhand to Hindus of the better class, often in a derogatory sense. It does not include Muslims and dalits.

golden land, fattening on the sweat of the people... just as the politicians do. The travel agent promises a seat' while taking the Santhal's money but who gets the seat finally? All the seats are 'reserved' for *diku* traders and Kolkata passengers. This happens every time, yet the people never seem to learn... they still crowd the buses like herds of sheep or cattle.

Perhaps, for the younger ones fresh from villages, there is some magic in the darkness of the journey to quench their thirst for adventure, their wander-lust and their dreams of wealth. So they begin their journey to Bengal starry-eyed, dreaming of the new world they will enter, dreaming of the new radios and wristwatches they will buy, dreaming of the new Hero cycles they will ride through the village marketplace like Lokhon. Murmu, the swashbuckling hero of *Gidi Mele-Mele, Koel Hale-Dhale*<sup>3</sup>. Such dazzling dreams! Such giddy heights of joy! For such are the stuff of dreams that sustain them through their long days and nights in Bengal. But for those Santhals who are burdened with little children, there is only the race to escape hungry stomachs. Why else would they leave this golden land and travel like horses to Bengal, standing all night in a bus? Such a miserable journey! And just when the sleep begins to seep into their tired minds, the bus-conductor jolts them awake with his rude shout: "Bardhaman is here. Get down, all of you!"

It was a Saturday night. Three young friends named Sani Hembrom, Suman Baskey and Nabin Murmu reached the bus depot for their night journey to Kolkata. Being the sons of middle-class families who lived in Dumka town, they had booked their seats in advance. Sani and Suman

<sup>3</sup> This was a romantic folk drama (also called *jatra* in Santhali) which became a runaway hit among the Santhals of West Bengal and Jharkhand during the 1990s. The literal meaning of the title is "The vulture watches gimlet-eyed while the nightingale plays hide-and-seek."

were going to Kolkata to write an exam while Nabin was a college student there. They first bought a bottle of *XXX* rum at the FL shop near the bus depot and drank some of it while waiting inside a tea shop. When it was time to board the bus, they started walking towards it with light steps. But on seeing the large crowd, they stopped in confusion. There were people packed inside the bus and on the roof, while some more were clustered at the open door, like a beehive. The clever *dikus* had entered the bus earlier and were comfortably seated in their 'reserved seats'. The three friends located their seats from outside but, to their dismay, found them occupied by three young Santhal women who appeared to be Bardhaman passengers.

"Oh, *pera hor*<sup>4</sup>," Suman spoke to the women in Polite Santhali. "Please do not sit here...these are our 'reserved seats'."

"We paid the conductor too, did we not? He told us to sit here!" shot back one of the women sharply.

"Where's your ticket?" asked Sani equally sharply. "The seat number is written on our ticket."

"So what? We have paid the money and we won't get up!"

The three friends realised that the women would not vacate the seats without a fight. Perhaps they would have surrendered meekly if a *diku* had ordered them, or if Sani and Suman had spoken in the *diku* language. But, having recognised them as fellow-Santhals, the women were taking them for granted. It was common practice for Santhal men travelling to Bardhaman—the youngsters as well as the elderly—to enjoy the breeze by sitting on the roof of the bus. Only those with little children stood

<sup>4</sup> *Pera hor* is a polite term used by Santhals while addressing an unknown person who is supposed to be a Santhal. By contrast, the *dikus* usually address Santhal men and women as "manjhi" and "mejhen."

cooped up inside. When the three friends failed to get their 'reserved seats' from the women, they went to the bus conductor for help. He managed to evict the women after a brief but heated argument. One of the women then started berating the 'leader' of their group.

"That bidhwa herel<sup>5</sup>... while taking our money, he spoke so sweetly: 'Yes, pera hor, I will get you the front seats.' Where is Tombe's father now? He was so sugary at that time and now he sits happily on the roof of the bus. Tell him to come down and speak to us. Otherwise, he must return our money."

Then Tombe's father was called down from the roof of the bus. In great trepidation, he pleaded with the bus conductor: "Conductor sahib, you had promised seats for all our ladies. Please, at least let those with little children sit."

"Why are you cracking jokes, bhaiyya? Can't you see the bus is packed fully?" replied the conductor with rough jocularity.

"Then, please return our money. We will not go by this bus."

"If you wish to come, then come. If not, then do not. But the money can not be returned. Once the ticket is made, it is made...this is a sarkari bus, you understand?"

Tombe's father returned to his group forlornly and informed them, "The money can not be returned." The three friends had been watching this drama unfold in silence. When the tension became unbearable, they turned to the conductor and asked him to return the people's money. But the conductor turned a deaf ear to their appeals. This angered Sani and spurred him to action. He got all the people down from the bus, along

<sup>5</sup> Used here as an expletive, the literal meaning of *bidhwa* here is "a bastard, a man born out of wedlock."

with their children, and led them to the nearby thana, while Suman and Nabin stayed behind to keep watch over the bus. At the thana, the policemen also ignored the people's complaints initially. Being corrupt, they were in the habit of receiving illegal payments from bus drivers and conductors, including a share in the profits earned from passengers without seats. But as the anger of the people mounted, the Daroga began to worry. Finally, he summoned the bus driver and conductor to the thana and ordered them to return the people's money. This was perhaps the first incident of its kind in the history of labour migration to Bengal.

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The parents of little children and the elderly took back their money. But the younger ones, who were intoxicated by their starry dreams, decided to stay on. Sani, Suman and Nabin also returned to their 'reserved seats' in triumph. They were seated to the right of the aisle, while two *diku* men who looked like *goondas*, were seated to the left. The long delay had put these two men in a bad temper. In the aisle, very close to these *diku* men's seats stood the three Santhal women. The bus was not crowded as before. Soon the bus left the depot and speeded towards the Dumka-Surf road. On leaving the outskirts of the town, its inside lights were switched off and darkness wrapped the interior. Nabin sat at the window seat, Suman in the middle and Sani in the aisle seat. They took out the bottle of XXX rum and had more swigs from it, before settling down to sleep in the long hours ahead. Since Sani and Suman would be appearing for an exam the next day, it was necessary for them to have a good night's rest. And XXX rum was no stranger to them... in fact, they even drank it sometimes before entering an exam hall since it made their minds work faster. Suddenly, the three friends were

awakened from their sleep by strange noises in the aisle, some rustling followed by loud shrieks. It appeared that the two *dikus*, emboldened by the darkness, had started groping the three women standing beside them.

"This dirty *diku* sod... he has lost all control! He is tickling me here and there... I swear I will elbow him if he does not stop...!" shrieked one of the women.

"Are you tired of standing, *pera hor*? Would you like to sit on our laps?" said one of the *diku* men insinuatingly, in a passable Santhali. Being petty tradesmen, they knew enough Santhali to cheat the people.

"Oh, no... you just want to grope us...!" snapped back the women.

On overhearing this exchange of words, Sani, Suman and Nabin were perplexed with mixed feelings. The women were seething anger at the *diku* men's behavior; but it was also common for such women to flirt with *diku* men. It was a known fact that a *diku* who spoke to them in Santhali could twist them around his little finger. Knowing this, the *dikus* had a very low opinion of such women: "These Santhal girls are so cheap... just say a few words in Santhali... buy them some *paan*... promise them some *jalebi*... after that, they will let you do whatever you want with them...!"

But Sani, who was angered by the men's swaggering audacity, growled at them in the *diku* dialect:

"E bhai, kahe paresan karte hai...ghar me bahan-beti nahi hai kya?"<sup>6</sup>

"Tum se matlab...bahan lagti hain kya tumhari?"<sup>7</sup>

6 This sentence is in colloquial Hindi, as spoken in the Bihar-Jharkhand region and may be translated as "Why are you troubling these women... don't you have sisters and daughters at home?"

7 The reply is in the same colloquial Hindi and may be translated as "What is that to you... are they your sisters?"

This insolent reply clearly showed that the two *diku* men were hardened by past experience in such matters and confident of getting what they wanted.

A war of words quickly flared up between the two groups of men, but before they could come to blows, the bus reached Panagarh stop and peace was restored by the other passengers. Then, all the 'reserved seat' passengers got down for a meal in the line-hotel, while all the standing passengers rested their aching limbs on the vacated seats.

*Baba Ka Dhaba* was the most popular line-hotel of Panagarh stoppage. All kinds of food and drinks were sold there, though the prices were steep. While the other passengers ordered food to eat, the two warring groups ordered liquor to drink. The war that had been interrupted festered in their minds and perhaps they drank with the intention of reopening hostilities on the road ahead. Having eaten and drunk to their fill, the passengers entered the bus again and shooed away those occupying their seats... almost like shooing away the goats or the sheep. All the 'reserved seat' passengers were seated again while the standing ones stood again, including the three Santhal women. And the two *diku* scoundrels started groping the three women again.

This time, liquor had made the two men more brazen. As soon as the lights were switched off, one of them pulled a woman on to his lap and started fondling her in a manner that modesty forbids us to describe. The women also started screaming in terror. This time, Nabin was the one sitting in the aisle seat. He was a young man with a notoriously stormy temper. He had been simmering for some time over the imperious manner of the two *dikus*. At this point, he could control himself no longer. Springing up swiftly, he punched the *diku* sitting near him with all his might. He continued to punch the man several times, landing four-five blows on the drunken man's face.

Then, Sani and Suman also jumped up from their seats. Suman held the other *diku* inert, while Nabin's fist made forceful contact with his face. The sudden violence of this attack stunned the two *diku* men and disarmed them completely. The iron fist of a Santhal made them see stars in the darkness. All this happened so swiftly that most of the other passengers failed to notice it. The few who did notice it also remained silent, perhaps cheering on the three friends with this thought: "Thrash those dirty pigs some more!"

Soon after, the bus reached Bardhaman. The conductor roared at the top of his voice: "Bardhaman is here! Get down! Get down!" Then all the Santhals, who would soon join the labour force of Bengal, started climbing down from their places, either inside the bus or on the roof. Their tired bodies became energetic and their spirits rose again. So they stood, holding their belongings and searching for family members in the crowd. Old friends met and greeted each other joyfully. Seeing the glow of happiness on their faces that moment, it was difficult to imagine that these same people had just endured a long journey of six hours, standing like cattle in the bus. Perhaps in this was seen the unique gift of the Santhal people: No matter how long and weary the journey was, they always have the strength to go on and they never forget their laughter.

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The bus reached Kolkata and stopped at Babughat, near the Hooghly. It was still very early in the morning and the passengers climbed down slowly in the half-light, holding their luggage. The yellow taxis of Kolkata started circling around them hopefully. Sani, Suman and Nabin woke up and, after stretching themselves, found their luggage. The two *diku* men also woke up. They seemed to have recovered from their drunkenness and sat quietly on their seats. Perhaps they were pondering over the night's

happenings as they felt their bruised and swollen faces. Noticing the other group was awake, the two *dikus* looked at them warily. The glances of the five men met. Then, in the tone of an injured friend, one of the *diku* men said to Nabin:

*“Henda ho<sup>8</sup>, you hit me too hard. My jaws are still hurting and my eyes are swollen...yes, you hit me too hard...but there is one thing I do not understand...why did you hit us so hard? For whom? Who are those women to you?”*

*Translated by Ivy Hansdak from the Santhali original,  
‘Ado Cedak’...?,” Jug Sirijol, 2012.*




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<sup>8</sup> Henda ho is a colloquial term in Santhali that may be roughly translated as “Hey, buddy”. It is commonly used among friends.

## CHEQUE-BOOK

Vasdev Mohi

**A**s usual Ambiben's loud scoldings started in the morning, to wake up Geeta and Reeta.

"The sun is out and these girls are not leaving their beds. Soon there will be numerous complaints from aunties. The *Baai* (maid servant) has not come. Phones will start ringing all across the colony to pass on news. These queens do not have any self-respect; but at my age I can not take cuss words from people. O Geetaree! O Reetali! Now get up, be quick." Her nostrils flared at the smell of burnt *gloras* and she realised they must have stuck to the bottom of the pan. She rushed, lowered the stove and lowering its flame stirred the pan with a laddle. She heard Ramana coughing and saw him sprawled on his stringed *charpoy* (cot woven with jute ropes). He was still in deep sleep under the influence of country hooch. "*kaam ka na kaaj ka, dhaai litre Daaroo kaa* (A good for nothing fellow—only keeps gulping hooch!) He does only two things—one, he forcibly snatches money from me which I earn by toiling in 12 households and two, he gulps pouches of country hooch." She continued to think in this vein and

tried to remember since how long this has been going on but could not. She felt that her eyes were wet, she touched them but found they were dry.

“O Geetaree! O Reetali!”

Geeta opened one eye and saw mother pouring water into the pan. She straightened the sheet covering Jagia and Radhika who were sleeping nearby, closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Ambiben was now ready along with Geeta and Radhika. “Quick! Get up! Be over with breakfast.” Her refrain continued. Raman, Radhika and Jagia had already brushed their teeth. Ambiben gave Jagia some tablets which she used to get every month from Civil Hospital. She gave him a glass of water and tossed his hair. Ambiben then turned to Radhika who often seemed nonplussed, shook her head left and right and gave her two tablets and water, then she kissed her forehead.

“Leave some money for me,” demanded Raman claiming he had to pay the electricity bill, if not paid immediately the entire household would plunge into darkness.

“I do not have money for your hooch. Go and move your limbs.”

Raman thought it better not to get bothered unnecessarily. He did not care. Now he knew about the niche where Ambiben used to hide some crumpled currency notes. Till now he could manage, afterwards when this option is over he will have to find another way out.

As Ambiben was going out of the house with Geeta and Reeta, Hemal came weeping.

“What happened? Did he beat you again?”

“I do not want to stay with him any longer.” Geeta and Reeta stood around their sister and caressed her head and back. Jagia and Radhika could not understand anything and kept on watching vacantly.

"I told you that Natha is a good person; do not leave such a man for the rogue Jiwana but you did not listen to me. You were charmed by Jiwana. He is handsome. He is a good person. Also he is earning a lot, you fell into his trap. You do not know about male trickery and men's meanness. See now, Natha feels forsaken and you are getting your bones broken. Why did he beat you up?"

"Same suspicious nature of his! He has a problem if I speak to anyone. He would suspect that I am having an affair. One gentleman asked about the residence of Maganbhai and I went to show him the house. When I returned I had to face the onslaught of his blows and kicks. In anger I also hit him with a plate. He has a swollen head. Had neighbours not intervened, I would have killed him today."

"Now shut up—'Would have killed him!—Did you have breakfast? Quick! Have breakfast and come with me to aunties for work. Even otherwise *Bunglewali* aunty was asking about you. She does not like the work of Geetaree and Reetali, she likes your work."

Hemal took the remaining *Gloras* from the bowl and a *chapatti* from *tawa* (hot plate) which was covered with a plate.

"You have magic in your hands *Maa*!"

Ambiben smiled. "Be quick. We are getting late."

"*Maa*! Did father also beat you?"

"Every husband beats his wife."

"Even my father?"

"A lot."

"You also used to beat him?"

"I often wanted to, but could not equal him. He was tall and strong. You and Abha have taken after him."

"Was he a rich man?"

"Not much but not pauper like Ramana."

"You left him for nothing. We all would have been happy. Sickly children like Jagia and Radhika would not have been born."

"What fancy tales you are reciting today? Now finish your food soon and let's move. What ails Jagia and Radhika? Stupid! It is all wish of goddess *Jagdamba* to bestow children of her choice."

"You left father because he used to beat you, is it true?"

"No, I had got used to the beatings but it was Ramaben who made me go out of control."

"Yes I was young but I remember that *Buaa* (Father's sister). She and you both often had a screaming contest. But she used to love me very much."

Hemal cleaned the plate and kept it at its place. Ambiben's mobile phone started ringing. "Yes, Sunita *Bhabhi* I am reaching within ten minutes."

"Hemli, come soon. This *Bunglewali* is very impatient. She is not able to hold herself. If there is a delay of two minutes she starts shrieking. She will be happy with you. I told you she likes only your work..."

Just then at some distance she saw a young, tall and handsome youth accompanied by a middle aged man approaching them. The middle-aged one appeared to be a familiar figure.

"O! Gordhanbhai! How come you are here?"

"After a long search... *Bhabiben*! There is a bad news, *Bhaisaab* is no more."

Ambiben was stunned. She could hardly control herself from crying. But she stopped herself and did not cry. She wiped her eyes with her *Pallu*, but her eyes were dry. Seeing her speechless, the young man made her sit on a cot, holding her arm. Hemal promptly ran into the house, brought water from the pitcher in a glass and held it to *Maa's* lips. Geeta, Radhika, Reeta and Jagia surrounded

the cot. Radhika's head swayed left-right more briskly than usual.

Ambiben drank the water and heaved a deep sigh.

Geeta brought two glasses of water for the visitors.

"When?"

"It is three days now."

Raman moved towards Gordhanbhai.

"What is the matter?"

Gordhanbhai, instead of replying to Daman, continued to stare at him. Raman realised that if he stood there even for a moment more, Gordhanbhai would chew him up with his eyes.

He moved from there and sat at some distance on the neighbour's cot. Geeta and Reeta also moved to a side and started whispering to each other.

Ambiben moved a lock of her hair dangling from her forehead and looked at the young handsome boy, who had kept his hand on her shoulder.

"Do you recognize him?"

"Rajesh!... Raajooro!..." Ambiben murmured staring at his face. Rajesh bowed down and touched Ambiben's feet. Ambiben embraced him and kissed him on his forehead.

"He is studying in a big college now." Ambiben kissed him again. "Bhabiben, now you will have to come home."

Ambiben stared at Gordhanbhai for sometime. "Why? What for?" "Come, I will explain it to you. Some rituals will have to be done according to holy texts."

"What shall I have to do after three days are over? Who have I to see? I will not come."

"Ben, do not say this. You have a home. You have your in-laws."

"Now I do not have anyone. The one who I was related to has already left."

"He did not leave you *Bhabiben*, you left him. Even after years, when *Bhaisaab* had come to enquire after you, he had come to take you home to fetch you. At that time you hid your kids begotten by Raman and turned him back from the door itself."

"Whatever, I will not come."

"*Baa!* Come and stay at home," said Rajesh once again touching Ambiben's feet. "Come along with Hemal sister". He saw Gem, Reeta, Radhika and Jagia at that moment and added, "Let them all come."

Despite all protests and hesitations, Ambiben yielded to the pleadings of Raajoora.

She offered tea and snacks to Gordhanbhai and Rajesh, sent Geeta and Reeta for work. She entrusted Radhika and Jagia to the neighbourhood women. Then she took money from the hidden place, and found it to be less than expected. She realised that Raman's snooping had worked. She stared piercingly at Raman and then left for Surendra Nagar along with Hemal. It was not very far, she would be back next day.

Ambiben, Hemal, Gordhanbhai and Rajesh entered the courtyard. Ambiben was setting foot on this courtyard after many years. This same courtyard which did not have a fourth corner, a courtyard of crooked shape! Where crooked people like Ramaben resided, it was natural that the courtyard also be crooked! Many of her memories were about this courtyard. After her wedding when she entered this house.... she immediately started loathing herself.

"What memories? What have I got to do with it all? I will just perform the rituals that the *Baaman* (Brahmin-priest) wants me to and then I will go away. What have I got to do with this house now?"

Wailing loudly Ramaben embraced Ambiben, "Alas! My brother... my golden-hearted brother..." She went forth

in the ritualistic chants of lamentations, and at that time a stifled sigh escaped Ambiben's lips. Ramaben affectionately embraced Hemal and kissed her forehead. Hemal did not react. Women from the neighbourhood gathered for rituals of mourning and embraced Ambiben one by one. She wiped her eyes with her *Pallu*. The eyes were dry.

Ramaben gave her a black sari. "Quick! Put this on. Soon the village Panchayat-ladies would be coming for condolence." "Widow's sari!" But she is not a widow! Raman is still alive. Ramaben came and seeing Ambiben standing with the sari still in her hands, shouted, "Rupa Bhabi, hurry up! It will be late".

Next day the *Baaman* came, chanted some mantras and went away taking his dues. Rajesh, after touching Ambiben's feet left for his college. Ramaben, Gordhanbhai and other relatives soon got into huddles, whispering among themselves. It did not take long for Ambiben to realise that the purpose of bringing her here was somewhat different.

Ambiben repeatedly sought leave of the family but she was not given permission. Two more days passed in this manner. She was worried that if she did not return soon she would lose her job of a domestic servant at the houses where she worked. Even otherwise she was often threatened with replacement as many more maids had come into the society from other areas. Now on her insistence, she was asked to scrawl her signature on a paper of some company and only then was she free to leave, Hemal warned her, "It is not necessary to sign any paper. It is for sure that father has left money for you and they all have ganged up to grab it. Do not sign anywhere."

An officer of the company called them into his cabin, Ambiben, Gordhanbhai and a village elder Naranbhai went inside.

"Your name?"

Ambiben looked towards Gordhanbahi.

"Amber, Ambiben."

"Amber? But the nomination is in the name of Rupa! Who have you brought?"

"Yes Rupa is also her name. In our home we call her Rupabhabi. Amber is her maiden name."

"But..."

"Manager Saab? Believe me she is Rupaben. I know her," insisted Naranbhai with full conviction.

"Do you have the Government's documentary proof with a photograph to show that she is Rupaben? Election card, Passport..."

Ambiben was about to blurt out that she had a passport. Last year the sister-in-law of *Bunglewali* insisted that she should go to Dubai and got her a passport.... Raman had no proof of marriage with her; neither was her name entered in his ration card; the card certainly had the name of his separated wife Hansaben. The agent got her a passport made in the name of Hansaben Ramanbhai Prajapati. On the basis of that passport she had been to Dubai but could not stay there long because all the time the faces of Radhika and Jagia would haunt her and she was also worried about her grown up girls Geeta and Reeta. That lady Aarti, sister-in-law of *Bunglewali* who initially appeared as a goddess here had changed into a demon there. She would give her stale food, would not allow her to use telephone. When she would go out she would lock her in so that she may not meet anyone else, lest she should speak about her salary etc. As a child, she used to help *Baa* (her mother) in embroidery work. They would embroider beautiful flowers on cloth. Flowers would appear perfect and beautiful on the front side of the cloth but when looked from the back, the beautiful flowers would present a messy and ugly side. Seeing this she and

*Baa* would burst into laughter. On reaching Dubai she was reminded of the backside of an embroidered cloth...

She came back to the present.

"Without ID proof I will not be able to do anything. The nomination is in the name of Rupaben Chhotalal Panchal and unless we get a photo identity of that name we will not be able to give the insurance money."

"But... but we are illiterate, from where shall we bring this proof, Manager *Saab*? She is the widow of my late brother Chhotalal. My brother married only once, there was no other marriage. She is the only one." Gordhanbhai looked helpless.

"You can see the ration card of Chhotalal and it has the name of Rupaben as his wife." Naranbahi said in a measured tone.

"*Bhai Saab*! In our records also Rupaben is mentioned as wife of late Chhotalal. But we have information that years ago Rupaben deserted him and left his home. Now to establish that this lady indeed is Rupaben the ID proof is an absolute requirement."

"Any way out...?"

"It is difficult.... But she must have stayed at some other place all these years. There she must have obtained the election card or something. She would not have stayed there without any ID."

Gordhanbhai looked at Ambiben. What reply could she give! She herself was confused whether she was Ambaben. Meethalal Solanki or Hansaben Ramanbhai Prajapati or again Rupaben Chhotalal Panchal....

At last Manager suggested a way out. "Yes, one thing is possible and that is, the office should carry out its own enquiry and confirm that she is Rupaben, widow of late Chhotalal. But all this will take time—at least a month. If she is in your house and we are satisfied that she is really

Rupaben then we will issue the insurance cheque in her name..."

Ambiben was not prepared to stay. Henial persuaded her.

"*Maa!* It is your money. It is your right. Why do you want to give up your right? They say the amount is more than Rs. 2 lakhs! Father has left it for you. Why should we leave it? Forget about the work of *Bungalewali*, if you lose that job, you will get work somewhere else. But can we get Rs. 2 lakhs ever again?"

Ambiben remembered when Rajooro was born, Chhotalal had lovingly told her, "We shall make our son a big man. He will not toil to till the land like us." He had mentioned about the insurance and said every month only a nominal amount was to be invested. By the time Rajooro grew up, the amount would turn into lakhs and he would be able to pursue higher studies....

Hemal thought that mother had got used to the crooked courtyard. But Ambiben missed Jagia and Radhika a lot. Her mobile had stopped working since the time she reached here. She wanted to go back to her home.

Gordhanbhai strictly warned her against such a move. "Who knows at what time the insurance company may send their person for inspection! Everything will again slip out of our hands. Rupaben should not leave the house under any circumstances".

Ambiben realised that no one bothered about her. Everyone was concerned about their own interests... But no, Rajooro is not like them, she thought. Many a times he had said, "Let us bring our brothers and sisters, we shall all live together..." Every day before leaving for the college he touched her feet....

The insurance cheque came after a wait of month and a half in the name of Rupaben Chhotalal Panchal. A bank account was opened in that name. Naranbhai helped a lot

in all this matter. The cheque-book would be issued next day.

Hemal was very excited. "When we get the cheque-book tomorrow we will get the cash and go back".

She had planned everything, she would keep the cheque-book with herself. They would leave the home before sunrise. Ambiben kept quiet.

Next day they got the cheque-book. Ambiben made preparations to leave. Everyone in the house wanted her to stay. Ramaben also was entreating her to stay. No one spoke about the cheque-book. Everyone considered her a family member. They also enquired about Abha. They had seen her only as a child, not after that. Rajooro had not yet returned from college. Night descended once again, Ambiben was sure that she would not be allowed to leave this house and it was possible that Rajooro also may insist on staying back. She will have to leave stealthily.

Early morning Hemal woke up Ambiben. She got up. She asked Hemal to move out and said she would follow. Rajooro was asleep on the string cot. She kissed his forehead. Rajooro kept his hand on his forehead in sleep. Ambiben placed the signed chequebook beneath his pillow.

When she came out Hemal asked her "Is the cheque-book secure with you?" Ambiben was quiet. While crossing the courtyard she felt that the courtyard was not necessarily crooked... She wiped her eyes. Her eyes were wet.

*Translated by Mohan Gehani from the Sindhi original,  
"Cheque-book", Koonj, 2012.*



## BELIEF

*Ashokamitran*

Those were the days when a cup of coffee cost 25 paise. All my major travels were by rail since there were no long-distance buses. The metric system had been introduced but they still measured cloth by the yard which is a little less than a metre. Tailors in small wooden kiosks or thatched sheds charged 75 paise for making a shirt. Shops charged a rupee. With a new piece of cloth I went to a shop newly opened. I did not know how good he was but the shop was very impressive. The signboard read "Raosons, Bangalore Tailors". Bangalore tailors were supposed to be very good.

It was about eleven when I entered the shop. There was only one person in it. Seeing me, he said, "Come in, sir. Come in."

I took out the piece of cloth. He hurried to 'say "Please sit down, sir." I sat on a chair but nothing happened. He said apologetically, "My son has the tape measure, sir. He will come now. All the tailors have gone for tea." Then he shouted to no one in particular, "Arre Ramu!"

I looked around. There were half a dozen pictures of Hindu deities on the walls. There was a photograph of the owner, the man standing before me. There was one other picture—that was wiped clean, and was adorned with flowers. I knew who it was. In a village some hundred miles from Bangalore lives a holy man, a mahatma. At a very early age, they said, occult powers had manifested in him. He is supposed to have effected a number of impossible cures. The number of his devotees grew to many thousands and a big organization sprang up. From the proceeds were built a hospital and a school. The holy man, the mahatma, did not perform miracles as much and as often as in those early days. He talked to the needy and provided some kind of solace and relief to them. I had not myself gone to the mahatma's village but had had his *darshan* a couple of times in Madras.

"So you are a devotee of the mahatma," I asked.

"No sir, I used to go to him once in a while. Now I do not."

"They say he is a good soul."

"No, sir. He had powers once. Now they all are gone. He only talks."

It was a very big picture and out of all the pictures on the wall it was the only one free from dust. The sandal paste and vermillion marks must have been applied only that morning. The flowers must have cost not less than a rupee.

The tailor shouted again, "Arre Ramu!" Then he went to the entrance of the shop and shouted "Arre Chottu!"

Two children came running into the shop. The tailor shouted in a language I could neither understand nor identify. The children ran into a small bylane. I inferred the tailor's house must be nearby. Those children could be his. But more probably, they were his grandchildren.

"I came away from town, sir" the tailor addressed me. They call the big bazaar of Madras as town. To run a shop in town, one must have a substantial capital. He continued, "I ran the shop for three years, sir. Somehow I did not like that area. I wanted to close down all the business and retire. But I had to get my son started in business. It was for him I opened the shop here."

He paused as though to ascertain I was listening.

"Nobody ran a shop as I did, sir. All the tailors take three yards for a shirt but I can do it in two and three quarters. Of course people will bring me three yards. I do not say anything. I give them the shirt. After a week or so when I see them going somewhere, I will call them and give them the extra bit of cloth saying, 'Here is the piece that was left over from your shirting cloth,' That is how I ran my business sir."

I did not know how to respond. Should I say, "Then cut out a quarter-yard from my cloth and give it to me right now" or should I wait until he called me from his shop a week after getting my shirt. Again the picture of the mahatma drew my attention. The picture was fascinating. It was shinningly cleaned and sandal paste and vermillion marks applied to the mahatma's forehead with great care and artistry. The flowers were fresh and the whole atmosphere was heightened by the picture.

"But what customers we have, sir," the tailor began again. "I will stitch exactly as they instruct me. Everything will be done in up-to-date fashion. The fit will be very comfortable too. So they will come again and give me more cloth for stitching. But when they leave they will say, 'Give me a good fit now' How do you suppose I feel, sir? How would any honest workman feel if the customer says that knowing fully well the workman will do the job perfectly?"

"I asked him irrelevantly, 'Where is your son?'"

"I have sent for him, sir. He has taken the tape-measure home. The tailors have also not come. They are hopeless sir. They are so indifferent. If I scold them, the next day they do not come for work. Of course, there are not many orders now but people will start coming. The dry-cleaning section is going full swing."

"What do you do for washing. Do you give them to the *dhobi*?" "No, sir. My wife and daughter and daughter-in-law do it. We never send the clothes outside,"

"How much do you charge for a Gwalior Rayon pant?"

"One rupee, sir. There are people who do it for 75 paise. Our washing will be first grade. Moreover, the clothes are not handled by anybody other than my own people."

Just then a young man entered the shop. The tailor exclaimed "Arre Ramu!" and started off in his language. The young man must be his son. He said something stincingly and gave the measuring tape to the father. The tailor was put out a little but he said to me, "Come behind the table, sir."

I went inside an enclosure and the tailor took my measurements. I gave him some specific instructions and he made a note of them. He asked me, "When shall I get the shirt ready? Next Sunday?"

That was a whole week away. I said, "I want it earlier."

"Then I will give it the day after tomorrow" I was startled. If he needed only two days, why did he ask for a week? I could have gone away but something made me look at the mahatma's picture again. "They say he is a good man," I muttered.

The tailor must have heard it. He said, "May be, sir. To me he did not do anything. He only helps the rich."

"I know of a number of people who said the mahatma was a major turning point in their lives. Besides, what do you expect saints to do. Give you gold bars?"

The tailor spoke again. He said softly, "May be he is a great man. I also know of people who obtained many benefits because of him. Even in my case he singled me out from a big crowd and spoke to me for several minutes. But what is the use, sir? He did not tell me about my son."

"Why, what is the matter with him?" I asked. The son was fixing tags to clothes given for washing.

"Not him, sir. My eldest son."

"What happened to him?"

"He died three years ago. He was not even 22 when he died."

"How did he die?"

"Nothing, sir. Just three days fever. I was not even by his side. He died with none of us to give him even a dose of medicine."

"Why, where did he die?"

"He was in Madras, sir, and we were all in Bangalore. My business was in Bangalore then. My son was married only the previous year and he was looking after his father-in-law's shop. One day we got a letter saying he was having slight fever. Two days later there was a telegram saying he was delirious. The next day he died."

"Couldn't you have started immediately after the telegram? It is only a night's journey from Bangalore to Madras."

"That was the tragedy, sir. My wife just had a heart attack. The telegram came to my shop around half past eight at night. All I could do immediately was to go to a bar and gulp four pegs of brandy."

I could see his agony. For a moment I was angry with myself.

The tailor commenced again with his narration. "Then I told my younger son I was going to Madras and started out on my motor-bike."

He paused again, I tried to visualize him on a motorcycle speeding to Madras on the highway at the dead of night.

"I did not know anything, sir, except the single thought of my son in bed with only some strangers around him. Of course they had given their daughter to him but would that be like his own father and mother by his side? I was racing along the road and I really do not know how I managed without any accident. Suddenly near a small town, I saw four or five people standing across the road and waving their hands to stop me. And I had to stop. One of them asked me, 'Are you mad?' I said, 'My son is lying unconscious in Madras.'"

"That might be but you will kill yourself if you go this way on a motorcycle at this time of the night. We have been hearing a frightful noise for the past 15 minutes and only now we realized, it was the sound of a motorcycle. A lot of cattle lie across the road, especially buffaloes. Even if you hit against a calf, your family will not have a single bone of yours to bury."

"What time is it?" I asked them.

"It is midnight."

"Only then did I begin to feel the fatigue. My head was reeling like a top and my whole body was aching in its joints. It was brandy that had kept me going until then. I had driven for two hours and must have done about 80 miles. I felt a parching thirst for the first time that night. I asked them, 'Could I get some tea somewhere?'"

"There is a teashop on the other side. But you will have to hurry."

I asked for the directions and went to the teashop. The shopkeeper was closing down for the night. I went in and asked for a cup of tea.

He looked at me and immediately prepared some tea and also brought me something to eat. He had closed the front door and was waiting for me to leave. I could see he was living in the shop itself.

I felt dog-tired. My eyes were getting heavy like lead. I tried to fight of my sleep but I could not. I asked the shopkeeper, "Is there a place where I can rest for ten minutes?"

"I knew I did not have much time. The picture of my son lying unconscious never left me. But my body just begged for rest. Just ten minutes. Just ten minutes. The shopkeeper showed me a bench in a corner. I stretched myself on the bench.

And then, sir. I closed my eyes. That was all I knew of the night. For when I woke up it was past eight in the morning."

He stopped again. His suffering was evident and awful. He was right back in those hours of his calamity.

At first I did not know where I was and what I was doing. Then the whole thing came to my mind in a flash. I rushed outside. I had left the motorcycle in the middle of the road with the key in it. I had stopped just for a cup of tea and had slept away a whole night and till nearly nine in the morning. Again I raced the rest of the distance. I reached Madras at noon. I dashed through the streets of Madras and reached my son's place but he died a short while before dawn. I moved towards a chair. But the tailor stood firm.

"That was all, sir. The next day I closed my business in Bangalore and came away to Madras. Madras was full of my son's memories but I came to Madras to punish

myself every minute of the rest of my life. If only I had not stopped by the teashop, my son could have at least seen me in his last minutes. Then somebody said there was a magician who drew dead people upon him and made them communicate. I went to the magician who said he would make my son talk through him. My son talked but I was not convinced. He said some utterly trivial things and went away. I did not go to the magician again. What is the use, sir? My son was not going to get back his life. Then I opened a shop in town and have been in Madras since then."

His story was finished. He turned towards his younger son who was just then beginning to do some cutting. The tailor told him something in his language and the son went out. Perhaps he was going to fetch the other tailors.

It was now past noon. I said to the tailor, "I shall come day after tomorrow" He mumbled, "All right, sir." Unintentionally I looked at the mahatma's picture again.

The tailor noticed my looking at the picture. He said, "Nobody can alter our fate, sir. Nobody, not even the most powerful mahatma. If he had hinted to me about my son, I would have kept him in Bangalore itself. But he did not. It is all fate. Nobody can alter it." I felt greatly relieved because now he spoke in a completely detached manner.

I went to him two days later and he had kept my shirt ready. It was very well done. But he had failed to carry out one of my instructions. That apart it was very good workmanship.

He was about to wrap the shirt when I pointed out his lapse. He was taken aback. He said, "Please come tomorrow evening, sir. I will have it altered."

"It is all right. I would have preferred it that way but it does not matter now."

"Are you sure you are not angry, sir?"

"No. The shirt is very well done. You charge six annas more than the other tailors but your workmanship is very good."

He wrapped the shirt neatly in a large sheet of newspaper. He spoke severely to his son and to the two or three tailors who were with him. Fortunately there was no other customer in the shop.

As he gave the packet to me, he said, "I would have altered it, sir, if you had insisted. But it would be nearly a day's work, sir. I would have had to remove the buttonholes. Removing buttonholes without damaging the cloth is like bringing a dead man back to life. You are very kind, sir."

"It is quite all right."

Again I looked at the mahatma's picture. And it was wiped clean and the sandal paste and vermillion marks applied freshly with the same tender artistry. Again nearly a rupee worth of fresh flowers.

I had not brought my bicycle. As I walked back to my home, I could not help thinking about the picture. Every day the tailor cleaned the picture and applied the sandal and vermillion marks carefully and lovingly. That itself would take about half an hour. Then fresh flowers every day. He did not very much bother about the other pictures though they were of gods and goddesses. His own photograph was a picture of neglect. But this picture of the mahatma he attended to every day. And yet he said he did not believe in the mahatma. He did not hesitate to tell a rank stranger that all that the mahatma did was mere talking and if he did anything at all, it was only for the rich.

A week later, I was cycling to the vegetable market when I heard somebody call, "Sir! Sir!" I had by then quite forgotten about the tailor and his story. So, for a moment I stood looking here and there but it was the tailor calling

me from his shop. When he saw I had seen him, his face brightened. I had to make a full turn with my bicycle and I went near his shop. He said, "Come in, sir. Come in, sir." Still I could not imagine why he should have called me.

But when he took out a bit of cloth, I remembered. It was quite a large piece and I could easily make two handkerchiefs out of it. And without the slightest trace of expression, he said, "This is what was left after preparing your shirt, sir." Just as he said, as I walked out of the shop I looked at the picture of the mahatma. Yes, it had been dusted that day also, with sandal paste and vermillion freshly applied. There was a large garland of roses this time. A few minutes later I remembered. It was the birthday of the mahatma.

*Excerpted from A Most Truthful Picture and Other Stories by  
Ashokamitran, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1998.*

*Translated from the Tamil by the author.*



## RUIN

*Devibharathi*

A galigai sat leaning against the wall, her hair open and dishevelled. She was weeping. I thought that she might kill me at any cost. Some of her motives were commonplace, some were special; that was all. I do not think I need to explain them to you. If you are still eager to find out, I will think you are an uncivilised voyeur with a shameless urge to watch his neighbour making love. Please forgive me. I do not have the time to argue with you.

Oh God, my wife is going to kill me, no doubt about that. She is going to slit my throat with a knife or plunge it into my heart. Of the two methods, she would much prefer the first, because the sight of blood spurting out of my slit throat would make her feel ecstatic, like climactic pleasure during intercourse. Only if she can not, for some reason, succeed with this method, would she choose the second. But she will not do it any other way. She could easily smother me with a pillow on my face when I am asleep or mix poison in my food. Even so, she is not going

to choose these means. Blood gushing out of my slit throat; my headless torso tossing and writhing in a pool of blood; my head, with unblinking eyes like an antique sculpture, rolling on the floor; the crowd of people gathered to gape at the spectacle; words of abuse adrift in the wind; and Agaligai, standing proud with her bloodstained hands in shackles, a defiant stare in her flaming eyes... wonderful!

Agaligai called me for dinner. I got up calmly and followed her. We did not speak to each other during the meal. But when we were about to finish eating, Agaligai noticed my perplexed expression and the beads of sweat on my face.

“What happened?”

I did not reply. She might guess that I was already aware of her plan to kill me.

“Are you ill?”

“Y-y-y... yes.”

“What is it?”

“I have a slight fever and headache.”

She came to me and placed a hand on my forehead. Then she brought her hand to the neck in a natural movement, pretended to check my temperature with the back of her palm, and felt the left side of my chest with, her fingers.

I felt my pulse quicken. My heart was pounding fast, as though it was about to jump out of the rib cage. Breathing became difficult.

The fruit knife was lying near the far right corner of the dining table. From where she was standing, Agaligai could, without removing her left hand from my neck, reach for and pick up the knife with her right, and in the blink of an eye, plunge it in my throat; or she could hold me down on this chair and stick the knife into my chest.

"Wait, I will heat some water. You will be all right once you have had an aspirin."

I sighed with relief.

Unable to sleep, I stayed awake all night. Agaligai lay fast asleep beside me. She was really in a deep slumber and not feigning it. It must have been post-coital exhaustion.

I got up gingerly, like a cat, I picked up the flashlight from under my pillow. I also turned off the bedroom lamp which was spreading soft blue light in the room. Taking care not to make any noise from scraping my feet on the floor, I tiptoed my way to the kitchen.

The knife still lay on the dining table, exactly where I had seen it earlier. I examined it under the beam of the flashlight. The knife was not sharp like I had imagined. The wooden handle was worn. The blade had blackened over time, its edge was blunt.

I used the attached clasps to secure the flashlight to the edge of the table. Then I laid my left thumb on the table and, holding the knife comfortably in my right hand, pressed and drew the knife's edge on the finger. It pained where the knife had touched the finger, but there was no wound: just a line where the knife had pressed into the flesh. I fetched a banana, laid it on the table and drew the knife along its length. Under the knife's pressure, the pulp broke the skin and burst through. Then I tried to cut through a head of cabbage, a beet and a potato. I found it really hard to slice them. During this exercise, the knife's blade hit the surface of the table repeatedly, making a series of taps. Whenever that happened, the sound drove me to panic. I had to turn off the flashlight immediately, stand completely, still and watch for any signs that Agaligai had woken up, before I could resume my trials. I opened the window and threw the sliced bits of vegetable and fruit in the gutter; then I searched the

room carefully. She could have hidden another new and shiny knife somewhere, right? As best as I could, I looked carefully in all the likely places—the wooden cupboard where the utensils were stacked, inside the vessels, and in the tins filled with grocery items. But because of my haste, fear and nervousness, I was unable to conduct a thorough search.

Keeping my roiling heart under control, I returned to the bed and lay down quietly.

Only when Agaligai woke me up in the morning with a cup of coffee I did realise that I had fallen asleep.

“Do you still have a headache?”

“No,” I replied quickly.

When I stood in front of the mirror after brushing my teeth and washing my face, my own face looked frightening to me. My eyelids were swollen. Tiny capillaries had spread their branches across the white expanse of my eyeballs. There was a faint black ring around both my eyes. Out of a sense of precaution that Agaligai must not notice my facial changes, I was very mindful of all my activities. Even while we ate, I made sure that the straight line of her gaze did not alight on my face. Fortunately, both of us were in a hurry to get to work. I dropped Agaligai in her office and then reached mine, I felt totally restive at work. The howls of wolves hunting corpses in a cremation ground ricocheted against the walls of my brain and raised echoes, I handed in a leave letter and came home directly. After latching the door from inside, I entered the bedroom and collapsed in the armchair. Lighting a cigarette, I began to reflect on my situation.

I closed my eyes, trying to retain a picture of Agaligai in my mind. A shape resembling Agaligai appeared, but it was faceless. Instead of a face, a triangular prism glittered in its place. That prism laughed at me. It was a demon’s

laughter. Even as she was laughing, Agaligai vanished in a plume of smoke. There was a cloud of smoke everywhere; white smoke as from a cigarette rose in a chain of rings. Agaligai's naked body appeared through the curtain of smoke. Her's was the quintessential form of voluptuous, virginal beauty, the magnificent splendour of femininity. I could not open my eyes. My mind was transfixed by her image. Agaligai looked at me and laughed—a mystic laugh that set the heart on fire: I knelt before her.

Agaligai held out her hands through the air.

A knife glittering like a piece of the sun materialised from somewhere. With a cruel laugh, Agaligai hacked one of her fecund breasts, full of the vitality of youth, and threw it away. Laughing relentlessly, she severed and threw away the other breast too. Blood spurted out of the gashes where the knife had cut through. Her dancing picked up speed. She seemed to be dancing to an inaudible magic melody without missing a beat. Miming a dance movement, she bent down and cut the flesh of her thighs with the knife and scooped it out. Then she deftly sliced the flesh off her buttocks, shoulders, back, belly calves and vagina, and threw it all away. Severed arteries gyrated all over her body. Her dancing had reached the peak of its frenzy. Her laughter resounded like thunder.

When the burning end of the cigarette touched my finger, I came back to my senses and opened my eyes. Smoke from the cigarette crawled upward in a straight line in front of my face and dissolved into the air.

I got up, went to the bathroom and washed my face. I drank a glass of cold lime juice from the refrigerator. Then I looked at the clock. There were at least five hours left for Agaligai's return. Before she comes home, I must search the entire house and find the knife she has stashed away.

I began my search calmly and carefully, without undue excitement. I started with our bedroom, a space common to both of us. I stroked the mattress and pillows to check if my hand pressed on something that felt suspicious. I checked everywhere: drawers in her cupboard, her neatly folded dresses, suitcases, different kinds of leather bags. I could not find the knife in the hall either. Although the kitchen had been searched earlier, I checked there once more, slowly, taking my time, and was disappointed. Failing to find the knife after two thorough searches in the space of two-and-a-half hours, I felt dispirited. I was also irritated with myself.

In order to calm the turbulence and clamour of my mind until Agaligai's return in the evening, I kept pacing up down inside the house. The soles of my feet became sore and my aching legs began to tire and collapse. As soon as the calling bell rang, I opened the door with the air of having returned home just moments ago and came back to the room.

"Why, you seem to have come back early from office today?"

The gentle patter of Agaligai's footsteps behind me scared the hell out of me. She could have had a knife in her handbag, could she not? I could not say for sure. I walked fast with the objective of escaping from her. But I was stopped by a wall. I turned around abruptly to face her and stood leaning against the wall.

Agaligai stood before me like a full grown teak tree. Her gaze pierced me for a few seconds. Frightened, I raised my right leg to take a step back, but my heel grazed against the wall. Through the corners of my eyes, I checked my left and right flanks. Agaligai took a step towards me. When she throws the knife at me, I should slide down instantly, push myself between her legs, knock her down and get away from here.

Agaligai came near me and placed the back of her palm on my neck and chest.

"How is the fever?"

"Well... it is better now"

With my tongue stuck on the roof of my mouth, I fumbled for words.

"It looks like the fever is gone, but why are your eyes so red?"

"...."

"Okay. Wait, I will heat some water. Take another aspirin, and you will be all right."

After hanging her handbag on the coat stand, Agaligai went to the kitchen. I got busy immediately. I scrambled hastily to inspect the contents of her handbag. What bad luck! The knife was not in her bag either. Knots of confusion throbbed inside my brain. A terrifying cacophony of sounds rose all around me. I collapsed head first on the bed with a thud. A storm was brewing in my world.

In the period that followed, gales blew in my mind daily, gathering speed and whirling madly. I began to understand that a whole lot of people—my colleagues, superior officers and subordinates who worked with me; fellow passengers, conductors and drivers whom I had befriended during my daily commute; and the rest of mankind (excluding me)—secretly carried a knife, wanting to kill me. How could I be friends with them for so long without understanding their real nature? But I was glad that at least at this stage of my life I was able to grasp this essential truth.

Quite often, whenever I could spare the time, I came home early from the office, even taking leave on a few occasions, and ransacked the house for the knife. Although I could not find it, my state of alertness gave me a lot of satisfaction.

A remarkable incident occurred during that period.

At the invitation of an office friend, I happened to visit the main shopping area of the city one evening. He said he wanted to buy a nail clipper. I was amazed when I looked at his fingernails. Each nail was sharp and glittering like a knife-blade.

We came to a small shop adjoining the pavement. I was overcome with depression. Attractive-looking knives, sharp and glittering like the sun, were arranged very tastefully, I asked the shopkeeper whether the knives were for sale. The shopkeeper laughed and said yes. His laughter struck me as insulting. Angrily I asked him why he was laughing.

"Do not be angry, sir. Surely, you must know that all goods in the shop are for sale?"

"Okay. Who buys these knives from you?"

"Who? Everyone, of course!"

"Does 'everyone' include women and children?"

The shopkeeper replied thoughtfully:

"Children do not buy them, but women...? So far, only one woman had bought a knife from me."

I felt a combination of extreme thrill and excitement.

"Only one woman?"

"Yes. Just a lone girl," he said firmly.

"Who was she? Do you know her?"

I could see webs of confusion forming in my friend's eyes. The shopkeeper stuck out his lip.

"No. After all, I do not ask my customers any unnecessary questions. Forgive me."

"All right. How old was the woman?"

"Around 30."

*Oh, God! Agaligai, too, is about to turn 30, isn't she?*

"Was she fair-skinned?"

"Yes."

My pulse quickened and sweat broken out on my face.

"Did she have a pepper-sized wart on her forehead?"

"No. Who are you? Why are you asking me these questions?"

"Please tell me. I need to know everything about this woman."

"Forgive me... telling you anything more will be a violation of business ethics."

I was silent for moment.

"Okay. What kind of knife did the girl buy from you? At least, tell me that."

I pleaded, more or less, but the shopkeeper scrutinized me with his increasingly confused gaze.

"What do you mean by what kind? Please explain."

"Will she be able to kill a man, specifically her husband, with that knife?"

"Yes," he said, with apparent certitude.

"Okay. Let us go," my friend gripped my shoulder. After carefully making a mental note of everything—the shop, shopkeeper, and the street on which it was situated—I followed my friend.

We entered a restaurant and sat at a vacant table.

"Tell me," said my friend.

"What?"

"Why did you behave like that? I do not think you are a mental patient."

Without replying, I got up, went to the washbasin, washed my face and came back. I wiped my face with my handkerchief.

"Tell me," he said again.

"What?"

"Why did you behave like that with the shopkeeper?" His gaze fell on me as if to examine something there. After scrutinising me from head to toe, he looked penetringly into my eyes. Without trying to look away, I stared back directly into his eyes. My friend's face turned pale and fear-stricken. Without answering his question, I asked him:

"Do you wish to kill anyone?"

"No," he replied, visibly alarmed. He looked frightened as he turned away from me.

"Why are you asking me?"

I ignored his question,

"All right. Do you expect someone to kill you?"

"No, why? Who would want to kill me?"

I could see that his body was trembling. Like a cat, he looked around fearfully.

"Who is going to kill you, huh?" I could not control my laughter. Forgetting that it was a public place, I kept slapping the table hard as I fell about laughing. Because my laughter had exceeded normal limits, I could feel my eyes welling up with tears.

"Please stop laughing," pleaded my friend, his voice hoarse and cracked. Abruptly I stopped laughing and asked him in a harsh tone:

"Why are you acting so innocent? Liar! You are such a fraud..."

"..."

"Tell me, do you think your wife will not kill you?"

Shocked, he pushed his chair back noisily and stood up.

"What are you saying?" he said in a hushed voice. He must have actually wanted to shout at me, but he had not

perhaps failed to notice that we were in a public place and the attention of a lot of people was focused on us.

"What are you saying? There is no reason why my wife should want to murder me."

He faced me with a limp smile. I could see that he was trying to pretend as if we were having a friendly argument. I told him calmly:

"A wife has just as many reasons to kill her husband as not."

After this conversation between us, he stopped interacting with me altogether. I did not worry too much about it, nor did I have the time for such concerns. Taking leave on the next day as well, I ransacked every inch of the house. But this time too, only disappointment awaited me.

That night, while we were making love, Agaligai asked me in a whisper:

"Do you remember what is special about tomorrow?"

In the dark cavern of my mind, there was a sudden flash of lightning. "What is special about tomorrow?"

"You really do not know?"

Oh! Is tomorrow the day I've been waiting for? I held her tight and kissed her passionately.

"Tell me, what is special about tomorrow?"

"It is our wedding anniversary. Do not tell me you forgot!"

My dear Agaligai! What a fine aesthetic sense you have! Murder your husband on the day of your wedding anniversary... ha, ha, ha! My mind jumped with joy. The vision of fresh blood bubbling and flowing... after many days, I slept peacefully that night.

But towards dawn, I was troubled by a doubt. How could she kill me when she did not have a knife? As soon

as this question surface my mind was once again rocked by confusion. Suddenly the face of the shopkeeper we saw in the market appeared in my mind.

Ha...!

Run, run, run over there and buy it right now! What if Agaligai gets hold of a knife that would inflame her urge to kill you! Gautama, death is beckoning you! Run!

This time I was alone with the shopkeeper. He knew somehow that I would come again. He had chosen a knife especially for me, he said. He handed me a knife that glittered like a shard of lightning. I paid him twice the amount he asked for. Later, after I had thanked him and was about to leave, he asked me hesitantly:

"Could you tell me what you intend to do with this knife?"

"Sure. My wife needs a knife with which to kill me,"

The shopkeeper conveyed his greetings to me. I entered my house very carefully. Again, there was a thick drizzle of panic in my mind. Agaligai was in the bathroom. Aha, what a fine opportunity! Anyway, she has to come here after her bath to change, doesn't she? Quietly, I entered our bedroom. I took the knife, kissed it and opening her wardrobe, placed the knife on the middle-shelf so that it would be directly visible when she opened the wardrobe. Then I closed the wardrobe as before, came to our bed which was right next to it, closed my eyes and laid down on my back.

My life's final moments.

When Agaligai comes into the room after her shower and opens the wardrobe, her eyes will fall on the knife that is going to set off her murderous frenzy.

I tried to erase these thoughts from my mind and empty it.

But many thought-bubbles were foundering in the lower depths of my mind. As if the founts of greed within me had opened suddenly, there was a gush of emotion; the steed of thought struggled to get up on its feet, then broke free of the reins and began to gallop, hooves pounding the dust.

The walls of my brain cells were juddering. The warmth of the morning sun; the unfolding petals of a rosebud; the lost face of one's first lover; a poem—any of these at random...

Oh, a soul's last wish!

Do I wish to say a prayer? Prayer? Prayer for whom? For me? For God? Do I believe in God? So far, I have neither abused nor worshipped God. How unfortunate! What, after all, is the point of a life which has neither encountered nor attained clarity on such a question?

Even now, I can get up in a jiffy and remove the knife; adorn her hair with the rose that has bloomed in my subconscious; share that poem with her. I imagine that I can even talk to her about my first love.

But it is too late now.

I hear the sound of Agaligai's footsteps, followed by the screech of hinges as she opens the cupboard with the knife inside!

*Translated by N. Kalyan Raman from the  
Tamil original, "Azhivu," Bali, 1993.*



## COOLIES

*Palagummi Padmaraju*

Any day now, water would be let into the canal. Still a hundred yards of the canal had to be deepened and the breaches in the banks filled up to contain the fresh inflow of water. If I failed to accomplish the task before the water was let in, the authorities would hold up the bills of the contractor and he would take it out on me, the poor clerk. I gathered as many coolies as I could during the night.

The dried up canal was thirsting for water. On either bank, clusters of mangoes were hanging from the trees, pulling down the branches by their weight. The sun had not yet risen and already the promise of unbearable heat was in the air. Except for a little water that had trickled into the temporary pool dug in the sandy bed of the canal, the landscape was waterless as far as the eye could see. But the trees were a deep green.

Through the gaps in the clouds of the eastern sky, the sun rose big and red. The village was on the western bank of the canal. I sat on the canal bank anxiously and

desperately urging the coolies on. Despite my exhortations the coolies kept to their slow pace of work. Slowly they filled the cane baskets with earth. The women coolies leisurely lifted the baskets onto their heads and emptied the earth into the breaches in the canal banks. The sun was growing intense with every minute.

The sun makes everything lethargic. Air hangs motionless. But the earth absorbs the heat and breaks into chunks, regaining its fertility. The sun gives the earth the great capacity for thirst. The earth learns to absorb torrents of rain in the monsoon and yields crops in profusion for another year.

Sweat glistened on the black bodies of the coolies. It gave a strange lustre to their hard muscles. Men and women worked and talked incessantly. The laziest of them all was the big fellow with the bushy mustaches. His name was Sathireddy. He had a sharp wit and the coolies forgot to work, listening to him. He would plunge his crowbar into the earth once in a while and take his own time over a funny anecdote. But he was strong as an ox. An 18-year-old girl filled her basket with lumps of dug up earth. She stood for a while listening to him. Then she lifted the basket on to her head and walked away. Her name was Rathi. Her place was taken by a woman of 30. She threw the basket down and took the cheroot out of her mouth. The woman-coolies smoke their cheroots keeping the lighted ends inside their mouths. They call it 'Short-cut-smoke.' She cleared the ash with her little finger, drew on it till the lighted end glowed red and put it again inside her mouth. She was Chellamma.

"Fill up, girl, and don't stand looking," said Sathireddy.

"You poke," she said between her teeth on account of the cheroot. He laughed at the vulgarism and she smiled.

The sun was getting hotter every moment. The voices of the coolies sounded like a distant hum. Eighteen-year-old Rathi suddenly broke into a screeching laughter. Her husband was digging with abandon a little distance away. His movements had the slow grace of an animal. He was throwing ribald songs in the faces of the woman coolies who came to him. His name was Musaliah. There was an old man by name Paddalu who was about 50; he was a Harijan by caste and he was describing the miraculous power of his village deity, Mavullamma.

Morning was repining into noon. I got up from the canal bank and sat in the shelter of the front verandah of the Karanam's house. The house was abutting the canal bank. In a corner of the thatched roof hung a cluster of paddy stalks full of grain. Sparrows hanging obliquely onto the stalks, pecked at the grain. On the closed half of the 'pial,' paddy was stocked in a granary improvised with thick ropes of hay and plastered on the outside with mud. The other side of the 'pial' opened into a neat level yard. Vapours rising from the earth gave the landscape a feel of the mirage. The slow sun hurt the eyes. Under the shade of the tamarind tree in the front yard, a cow was chewing, cud and standing drowsily. Old Paddalu was narrating:

"On the day of the festival, they sacrifice a he-buffalo. A heavy sword is used for the purpose. The head must be severed with one stroke. If it does not, it bodes evil. The blood is caught in a big earthenware. It is put near the feet of the deity. The temple door is closed. Five locks are put on the door by the heads of the five surrounding villages. The Karanams and Munsiffs of the five villages put seals on the locks. Throughout the night, washermen keep vigil around the temple. Early next morning, the seals and the locks are checked and the

temple door is opened. Not a drop of blood will be left in the dish. The deity leaves a few things in the dish which signify her prophecies for the year. Water indicates plenty of rain. Cotton threads mean that cloth will be cheaper. Every prophecy comes true..."

Young Musaliah untied the cloth round his waist and wore it round his head as a protection against the sun. He tucked up the loose ends of his dhotee behind him, taking them between his legs. Sathireddy took time lighting his cheroot and resumed his work. Work slowed down. The lifted crowbars sank into the earth, tired and out of control. The sun was reaching the top of the head. The village looked petrified in the sun. Crows jumped open-mouthed from branch to branch. Then Sathireddy plunged his crowbar into the earth and did not lift it up again. They all threw their implements. The work was halfway through. It could be completed if the canal remained closed till the evening.

Sathireddy was washing himself near the well on the bank. Rathi asked him for some water. He drew a bucketful from the well, but before giving the bucket to her, he threw a handful of water on her face.

"You rogue," she shouted in mock anger.

Rathi's husband looked daggers at them. Sathireddy tasted the water and spit it out making a wry face.

"Phew, it's saltish," he cried.

All the coolies ran to the fresh water pool in the bed of the canal. The water got dirty in a minute. Paddalu admonished them though he was of a lower caste.

"See what you have done. Where can we get water to drink after finishing our food? You have churned up the little good water we have."

Every one agreed that Paddalu was right, but the mischief was done, Musaliah said.

"By the time we finish eating, the water will be clear."

There was hunger in the hollowness of his voice. He was a toddy taper by caste and there was in his bearing, a headlong recklessness characteristic of that caste. He looked as though he would swing his fist at some one even without any provocation. He and Rathi were eating out of the same vessel, rice soaked in *Gangi* (a kind of gruel) with salt and fried prawns. Sathireddy distributed small bits of pickle he had brought for every one. He gave a particularly large bit to Rathi. Chellamma smiled indicating that she had observed his partiality. The smile was tinged with a little jealousy. Musaliah looked at Chellamma and Rathi. Rathi laughed awkwardly.

The trees looked up at the sky tired and weak. The world had the pitiful look of a criminal condemned to eternal punishment. But the tender leaves on the edges of the branches were maturing into dark greens. Beds of paddy seedlings looked like green carpets spread here and there to relieve the monotony of the long stretch of dark brown earth. The slow unquenchable thirst in the air made all living things drowsy. The crows shifted their one-eyed looks perpetually in search of the non-existent cooler place. Their beaks were open making silent 'sounds'.

I spread a mat on the 'pial' and lay down, looking at the roof sightlessly. The coolies washed their vessels after eating their food. They dipped their vessels into the pool of fresh water without disturbing it and drank their fill. They gathered around the trunk of the tamarind tree and pulled out tobacco from inside the folds of their turbans. They wetted the leaves and rolled them into cheroots.

I did not notice when the sun started its descent. I woke up suddenly from a kind of drugged day dream and

began urging the coolies to start work again. They got up unhurried and complacent, winding the turbans round their heads. The women coolies tied cloth rings over their heads to seat the baskets of earth. Without bending, they kicked up the edges of their baskets with their feet and caught the rising edges dexterously with their left hands. The men tucked up the loose ends of their dhotees behind them, drawing them between their legs. They drew the last puffs on their cheroots greedily before throwing them away.

The work gathered momentum rather too slowly for my liking. Sathireddy started singing, just to take his mind away from the sweltering heat.

Why do you giggle, Oh, girl,  
Looking at me?  
And wipe the sweat on your cheek  
And throw it at me?  
Near the hut in the lane at dusk  
There'll be none.  
Why do you exhibit your eagerness  
In this broad daylight?

Musaliah took up from there and sang a variety of songs.

They struck a layer of sand beneath the black earth. So they laid aside their crowbars and took up spades.

Rathi kept the basket slanted with her left knee and Sathireddy filled it up with sand with his spade. Playfully, he swung a spadeful of sand on the bare midriff of Rathi. In mock disgust she kicked away the basket of sand on to his thighs pretending to be annoyed. She dusted her navel and legs abusing Sathireddy. Musaliah stopped singing and looked at her.

The sun was descending. The air cooled a little. The work gathered momentum as it reached its final stages.

My mind was free from anxiety. I sat on the bank watching the coolies respectfully. Their concentration was divine. Once they got into the stride, there was no stopping them. But you could not hurry them, however much you tried. Their sense of urgency was on a different scale. They had their own estimate of time and work, and they knew they could finish a job in a certain duration. Once we entrusted a job to them, we were in their hands. Our anxiety should await their pleasure. In a way we were their slaves.

Suddenly Musaliah threw a basket at Rathi with devilish force. Terror capered in Rathi's face and eyes. He lifted the basket again and hit her on the head. She lifted her hands in defence, covering her face with them. The end of her saree slipped from her shoulder and breasts. Blood trickled down from her nose and lips. The men threw their implements and ran to hold Musaliah. Rathi wailed helplessly, shivering like a leaf in a storm.

"You dirty bitch!" was all that Musaliah could yell, choked with anger. He was in the grip of an uncontrollable rage. Paddalu tried to calm him down.

"Shame on you, you exhibit your strength on that chit of a girl," he said.

I hurried to the spot and enquired as to the cause of the outburst. Shaking in every limb and throwing his words in a stutter, Musaliah said.

"She is flirting, the slut,"

"No sir, oath on you, I didn't do anything," pleaded Rathi pathetically. She looked around as though she was appealing for the protection of her life.

"Shut up, you jade," shouted Musaliah, "I'll skin you alive."

He threw away the men holding him in a giant heave and ran towards Rathi who forgot even to run away, petrified with fear. Before he could get hold of her hair,

Sathireddy deftly caught him from behind in his vice-like grip and held him fast. He said in a cool voice.

"Cool down, brother. Why kick up such a row over an innocent joke?"

Sathireddy released him when he was certain that he cooled down sufficiently. Then he exhorted the coolies.

"Take up your spades. Come along, girls, with your baskets. It is already sundown and we have a lot of work on hand."

They resumed their work again. But the painful beating of my heart against my ribs did not subside for a long while. I sat looking at Musaliah apprehensively.

The last breach in the canal bank was filled up as the sun sank behind the western horizon. The moon, which had come up sometime during the afternoon was warm. One or two of the more thrifty coolies, who had saved a spot of their midday meal for the evening, were at it. I sat watching Musaliah and Rathi, apprehending an outburst any moment. Some of them asked me for some money. I made a part payment, telling them that the final settlement would be made on the following day. They went away in a bustle, and Musaliah and Rathi were among them.

I dined at the Karanam's house that night. They gave me a cot and I put it in the open yard on the southern side of the 'pial'. The moon was at the apex of the sky shedding warm blue light. I lay down thinking of Musaliah and Rathi; I could not get them out of my mind. The untamed wild animal in him and the helpless fragility in her disturbed me. I was afraid that something terrible was going to happen that night. I had heard of many instances of murder among rural folk, for ostensibly lesser reasons.

As I was slipping into a doze, I heard them coming back, evidently from the toddy shop, in high spirits. Men and women were pushing and cursing each other, laughing

rather loudly. They threw themselves down, anywhere anyhow, some on the bank and some on the sandy bed of the canal. Musaliah and Rathi appeared to have had a drop more than the others. They walked unsteadily to the shade of the tamarind tree and literally collapsed near the trunk. Sathireddy, rolling on the grassy patch beside the well, sang, lifting his voice rather high,

The effigy of fortune  
capered on the tamarind bough  
The wayside Goddess, Musalamma  
had gone for her confinement...

Many other voices took up the chorus, "For her confinement," words rolling heavily on their drunken tongues. Voices rose—all out of tune. The whole effect was eerie. Sathireddy sang,

Let's sacrifice a couple of  
he-buffalos to Potharaju  
And migrate to another place...

Then Musaliah found his voice,  
The buxom lass raised her hands  
working the ware-lift,  
And her blouse protested  
with a tearing sound p-r-r-r.

Soon, the songs got mixed up, several singers raising their voices at once, in a variety of keys. Gradually, the voices sounded thin and drowsy, and then I did not hear them any more.

My mind was hazy with sleep. But I was conscious of the cool touch of the moon. Suddenly I felt some movement beside my cot. I opened my eyes and looked without moving. About ten yards away, I saw two figures locked in a half embrace, walking unsteadily. I recognised them as Musaliah and Rathi. He whispered hoarsely in her ears,

"Let's get on to the pial."

"In this broad moon light?" asked Rathi.

"Get along you slut," gurgled Musaliah, entwining his hands around her waist from behind. She laughed in her throat, leaning back on him. He lifted her bodily and carried her on to the pial, while she giggled happily. I was puzzled, but my mind was at peace.

Some confusion woke me up. I sat up on my cot, rubbing my eyes. I saw come collies hurriedly throwing baskets, crowbars, and spades on to the bank. Some were left on the bed of the canal after work, the previous evening. Then I saw the wet streak shining in the darkness at the bottom of the canal. The canal was opened and it would be full by the morning. The moon had already set. I looked at the 'pial'; it was dark there, too dark. But I knew that all was well. I felt a sort of fulfilment brimming my heart. I slept without a care in the world till the hard sun tickled my face.

*Translated from Telugu by the author*



## GIVE ME YOUR SORROWS

*Rajinder Singh Bedi*

**O**n the night of the wedding things did not happen as Madan had anticipated.

His plump sister-in-law cajolingly pushed Madan into the middle room and Indu was before him, cloaked in a red shawl and distinct from the darkness. Outside, the laughter of Chakli Bhabi<sup>1</sup>, of Daryabadi Phupi<sup>2</sup>, and of the other women broke the silence of the night like crystal candy slowly dissolving.

These older women had all had their day. The echo of what their lusty husbands had said and meant on that first night no longer came to their ears. They themselves were well-established now and they were intent on establishing one more new sister. To these daughters-of-the-earth man was like a cloud to whom they must look for rain. If there was no rain, then they must entreat, promise gifts, perform magic. The women all thought that Madan, though he was an adult now, did not know what was happening—when

<sup>1</sup> Chubby sister-in-law.

<sup>2</sup> Father's sister from Daryabad.

they had come so late at night and awakened him, he had appeared confused. "Where, where are you taking me?" he said. But in fact Madan had been waiting for this moment as he lay in an empty space before his house in this new neighbourhood of Kalkaji. The buffalo of his unlucky neighbour, Sabta, was tied near Madan's cot and continually snorted-and sniffed at Madan, who tried to keep him away with his hands. At such a time there was no possibility of sleep.

The moon, which guides the waves of the ocean and the blood of women, shone through a window as though it were watching for Madan's next move. He stepped forward from the door, conscious of a roaring within himself, and pulled the cot into the moonlight so that he could see the bride's face. He hesitated, but then he thought, "Indu is not a strange woman whom I cannot touch; she is my wife." Looking at the red-wrapped bride, he judged where Indu's face should be, and when he touched the bundle there it was. Madan had thought that she would not easily let him look at her, but she did, as though she had been waiting several years for this moment, and some imagined buffalo's nudgings had kept her too, from sleep. Though her eyes were closed, Madan could see that she had had her share of sleeplessness. He looked at her face. It was round rather than oval, so round that the moonlight made shady caves between the cheeks and lips, seemingly between two blooming hillocks. The forehead was a bit narrow, with curly hair spontaneously rising from it...

Indu freed her face, as though she had granted the privilege of looking only temporarily; there were certain limits imposed by modesty. Madan, a little roughly, tilted the embarrassed bride's face up again, saying in an emotional voice, "Indu"!

Indu felt slightly afraid. It was the first time in her life that a stranger had called her name in this way, and this

stranger was destined to be hers. Indu looked upward for the first time but quickly closed her eyes and said only, "Yes". It seemed to her that her voice came from some region under the earth.

Very slowly their conversation began; once started it continued and never seemed to come to a stop. Indu's father, Indu's mother, her brother, Madan's brothers and sister, his father, the father's Railway Mail Service job, the father's temperament, favourite clothes and food habits—all were surveyed. In the middle of this, Madan wanted to stop the conversation and do something else but Indu disregarded any such inclination. Helplessly, Madan began a description of his mother who had died of tuberculosis when he was seven years old. "So long as she lived, the poor woman, medicine bottles were in father's hands. We waited on the hospital steps, and little Pashi waited in the house; we were all tired but sleepless with anxiety. Then finally one day, on the evening of the 28th of March...." and Madan was quiet. He was very close to crying. Frightened, Indu pressed his head to her breast. Thus in a moment Indu's unconscious sympathy achieved Madan's conscious wish! Madan wanted to know more of Indu—but she caught his hands and began to speak.

"I cannot read or write, but I have known my parents, my brothers and sisters-in-law and scores of other people; I understand many things. Now that I am yours, I would like to ask something of you."

Madan was like one intoxicated by his emotions. With impatience and quick generosity mixed in his voice he asked, "What do you ask? I will give you whatever you wish!"

"Do you promise?"

Madan spoke without hesitation, "Yes, yes, I promise." But then doubts rose in his mind. His business, just

begun, was still slow; if Indu asked for something beyond his power to give, what would he do?

Taking his rough hands in her soft ones and laying her cheek against them, Indu asked, "Give me your sorrows."

Madan was relieved, but he was also surprised at this request. He tried to look again at Indu's face in the moonlight but found no answer to his thoughts. Could this be a memorized sentence taught to her by her mother or a girl friend? Then he felt a warm tear on the back of his hand and he embraced Indu warmly, saying, "Given!" But all this had taken his desire from him.

The guests one by one took their departures. Chakli Bhabi, her two children firmly in hand, descended the stairway carefully because of her third pregnancy and left for her home. Daryabadi Phupi, who, upon losing her precious necklace had wailed so loudly that she fainted and then in the washroom had found it again, took away her dowry share of three garments. And the uncle left, after receiving a wire about his "Justice of the Peace" appointment; perhaps due to excitement, he had nearly kissed Madan's bride!

The old father and the younger brothers and sister remained in the house. Little Dulari Munni continually snuggled in her sister-in-law's arms. If a neighbourhood woman wanted to see the bride, for any length of time, Dulari was the one to approach. Indu slowly settled into the house, but the people of this new neighbourhood of Kalkaji still made excuses to stop in front of Madan's house while passing by, hoping to see Indu. When she saw them she quickly drew up the edge of her sari, covering her face; what they saw in this brief uncovered second pleased them more than long glimpses without the sari covering.

Madan's business was the selling of crude turpentine. Soon after the marriage, the pine and cedar trees which were the main source of supply were caught in a forest fire and reduced to dust. Turpentine sent from Mysore and Assam was expensive, and people were not prepared to purchase at such a high price. While his income decreased, Madan closed the store and adjoining office early and came home. Reaching the house, he always tried to hurry everyone into bed. At meal time he himself placed the dishes before his father and sister, and after all had eaten he gathered up the utensils and put them by the water-tap. All understood that because of Indu, Madan now found the housework worthy of his attention. Madan was the eldest, Kundan younger than he, and Pashi younger than both. When Kundan, to show his affection for his sister-in-law, insisted on waiting to eat with her, father Dhuni Ram scolded him. "You go on and eat. She will get her food." Then Dhuni Ram surveyed the kitchen. When Bahu<sup>3</sup> had finished her food and turned her attention to the pots, Babu<sup>4</sup> Dhuni Ram stopped her, saying, "Leave them Bahu, the dishes can be done in the morning."

"No, Babuji, I can do them very quickly now," she said. In a trembling voice Babuji replied, "If Macfan's mother were here, daughter, then you would not be doing all this."

And Indu dropped her hands.

Little Pashi was embarrassed in the presence of his sister-in-law, because Chakli Bhabi and the father's sister from Daryabad had performed a ceremony to "Make the bride's lap green." They had placed Pashi in Indu's lap; after that she felt that he was not only her husband's younger brother, but her child. Whenever Indu lovingly tried to take Pashi in her arms, he protested and kept

<sup>3</sup> Daughter-in-law. The father would use this term rather than her name.

<sup>4</sup> Babu, or Babuji: father.

a certain distance from her. By coincidence Babuji was always present at such times and he scolded Pashi. "What is this? Here your sister-in-law loves you. Do you think yourself too grown up for this?" But Dulari could not be chased away from her! Her obstinate insistence, "I will sleep with Bhabi"<sup>5</sup>, seemed to awaken some demon in Babuji. One night he slapped Dulari so hard when she said this that she fell upon the uncemented drain in the house. Leaping forward, Indu helped her, her dupatta<sup>6</sup> falling from her head. Her hair, the red vermillion in her parted hair, the ornaments in her ears were all revealed.

"Babuji!" Indu caught her breath, catching Dulari and pulling up her dupatta at once, acutely embarrassed. She hugged the motherless child to her breast, making her feel as though she were lying in a bed with nothing but pillows and cushions all around, no hard bed-frame, where nothing at all could hurt her. Indu caressed Dulari's sore spots, paining but also pleasing her. Large, lovely dimples returned to Dulari's cheeks. Seeing these dimples Indu said, "Oh Munni! May your mother-in-law die! What dimples are in your cheeks!"

Munni looked up, diverted. "You have dimples too, Bhabi."

"Yes, Munni," Indu smiled.

Madan was angered by all this; he was standing nearby and listening. "She may be a motherless child, but I tell you it is a good thing in some ways."

"What? Why is it good?" Indu asked quickly.

5 Sister-in-law; as in Chakli Bhabi.

6 Dupatta is a long scarf of three piece outfit worn by women mostly in North Western India; the other two pieces being *qamees*, overdress, and *shalwar*, baggy trousers. A woman in the presence of her husband or elders always keeps her head covered with dupatta as a sign of respect and submission. In the presence of men other than her husband she will also veil her face with the dupatta.

"It is good. If no bamboo grows, no flutes will make noise; no mother-in-law, no quarrels."

Indu was angered. "You may go, ...go on to sleep. What business is this of yours? If a person is alive then he quarrels sometime, doesn't he? A quarrel is better than the silence of the burning ghat! Go away, what business have you in the kitchen?"

Madan stayed, abashed. The other children had been put to bed by Babu Dhuni Ram. Madan remained standing there. Necessity made him stubborn and shameless. But when Indu reprimanded him again, he left.

Soon Madan was in bed, restless, but thinking of Babuji, he did not have the courage to call Indu. His impatience reached its limit when Indu sang a lullaby to help Dulari sleep. "Come, queen of sleep, you intoxicated one, come..." This lullaby which put Munni to sleep drove sleep far from Madan. Disgusted with himself, he pulled the cover roughly over his head. With the white cover over him, holding his breath, he suddenly thought of being dead. It seemed to him that he had died and his bride Indu sat near him crying loudly, beating her forearms and breaking her bangles, falling on the floor and rushing, sobbing, into the kitchen to smear ashes from the fire on her hair; then again going outside and raising such a lament that all the people in the lane could hear. "Neighbours! I have been ruined!" Now she did not care for her dupatta, her qameez, the red parting in her hair or the designs and ornaments in her hair. Her thoughts and feelings were distracted.

Tears were flowing rapidly from Madan's eyes. Just then from the kitchen came Indu's laughter. Coming back to the reality of his world Madan wiped away his tears laughing. At a distance Indu too was laughing, but her laughter was suppressed. Out of respect for Babuji she tried not to laugh loudly, as though there were something

immoral about laughter. Silence, the dupatta, hushed laughter, the veiled face, this was Indu. Madan imagined Indu as present and talking about many things. He loved her as he had never loved her before. He then returned again to his world, with the empty bed next to his bed, and he called in a low voice 'Indu' and was quiet. Sleep, that intoxicated queen, embraced him. He nodded, yet it seemed that Sabta's buffalo of the marriage night was with him, sniffing at his face. He rose in a restless mood, looked towards the kitchen, scratched his head, yawned twice or thrice and lay down. He slept lightly; when Indu came and her bangles jingled as he smoothed her bed, he awoke and sat up. Rising so hurriedly further sharpened his desire. Madan's whole body burned with an internal fire. He asked excitedly, "So, you have come?"

"Yes."

"Has that damned Munni died in her sleep?"

Indu started. "What are you saying! Why should she die, the only daughter of her parents!"

"Yes, the only husband's sister of her Bhabi!" Madan assumed a severe authoritative tone. "Do not encourage the little witch so much."

"What is the harm in it?"

"Here is the harm," Madan grew more annoyed. "She does not leave you alone. Look how she clings, like a leech. She never stops pestering!"

"Yes...." Indu sat on the edge of Madan's *charpoi*<sup>7</sup>. "But should you not revile your sister this way. She is only a guest, if not today, she leaves tomorrow; if not tomorrow then the next day; one day she must leave this house." Indu wanted to continue but she could not. Before her eyes appeared her mother, father, brother, sister, uncle—all

<sup>7</sup> Indian style rope bed.

lost to her. Once she had been their Dulari<sup>8</sup>; in the wink of an eye she had become separate and distinct. Suddenly they had begun to discuss her marriage, day and night, as though a cobra's hole had been discovered in the house and no one could relax and sleep until it had been caught and expelled. All sorts of snake charmers and magicians were called, even the legendary Dhanwantari<sup>9</sup>. Finally, one day from the northwest came a colourful marriage procession like a storm. When it cleared, a vehicle stood there in which sat a bride dressed in gold and silver embroidery. Behind her, in the house, the monotonous playing of the shehnai<sup>10</sup> sounded like the snake charmer's *been*<sup>11</sup>. With one jolt the vehicle left.

Madan's bad temper had not abated. "You women are so clever. You arrived in this house only yesterday, yet all of its people care more for you than for me?"

"Yes!" Indu affirmed.

"This is all deceit—they have been tricked!"

"Oh?!" Tears came to Indu's eyes. "So their love is a result of my deceit?" She went to her bed and hiding her face in the pillow began to sob. Madan tried to think what to do, but Indu got up and came to him, catching his hands tightly. She spoke directly. "You are always making mean remarks.... what is wrong with you?"

Madan decided on a display of husbandly dignity. "Go on, why don't you go to sleep? There's nothing I want from you."

"You do not need anything from me, but I must take my whole life from you!" She scrambled towards him, like a fish trying to climb the rushing waters of a waterfall

8 Dulari means loved one or beloved.

9 The legendary physician of the gods.

10 An oboe-like instrument commonly played at weddings.

11 Snake charmer's pipe.

instead of going with the current. Pinching, grabbing, crying and laughing she said, "Will you call me a deceitful woman again?"

"That is how all women are!"

"Just wait... you..." Her words were almost inaudible. "What was that?" Madan demanded. Indu repeated it in an audible voice and Madan guffawed in uncontrollable laughter. Then Indu was in his arms, saying, "You men, what do you know? When a woman loves a man, she loves his relatives too, even his father, brother or sister." Her thoughts jumped ahead. "I will even arrange Dulari Munni's marriage."

"This is the limit! Now she is not one length high, and you begin to think of her marriage!"

"You see her one length high?" Indu put her hands over Madan's eyes. "Close your eyes a bit and then open them."

He did close his eyes, and after some time Indu said, "Now, you must open your eyes! In so much time, I will surely grow old!" When he opened his eyes, he felt for a moment that it was not Indu before him but Munni. Then he was lost in his thoughts.

"Up to now I have put aside four suits of clothes and some cooking utensils for her," Indu disclosed, and when Madan gave no answer, she shook him anxiously. "Why are you worried? Do you not remember your promise? You must tell me your sorrows."

"Eh?" Madan was startled; then his heart lightened as he felt his burdens shared. He hugged Indu and this time it was not only her body but her soul as well.

To Madan, Indu was all soul. She had a body, but somehow it remained invisible to Madan. There was a veil made of dream filaments, coloured by breaths of smoke, dazzling with golden threads of laughter, which

always covered Indu. Madan's hands and eyes committed sacrilege, like Duhshasan through the centuries outraging the modesty of Draupadi<sup>12</sup>. Bolts upon bolts and yards upon yards of cloth to cover her nakedness came down from the sky unceasingly. Duhshasan was tired and defeated; he fell to the ground; but Draupadi still stood. Dressed in a pure and chaste white sari she appeared a real goddess. Madan's lusty hands were wet with the sweat of shame; he raised them, spreading the fingers wide, passing them before the burning pupils of his eyes. Through these twitching fingers he could see the soft pleasantness of Indu's marbled body. For use it was near, but for lusty misuse it was very far. Sometimes when Indu was cornered she would say, "What are you thinking of? There are young ones in the house, what will they say!"

Madan replied, "The young ones do not understand; the old ones are indifferent."

During this period Babu Dhuni Ram was transferred to Saharanpur. There he was made head clerk of the Railway Mail Service Selection Grade. Such a large house was assigned to him that eight families could have lived in it, but he stayed there alone. Throughout his life he had never before been separated from his family. He enjoyed family life, and such loneliness at the end of his life distressed him. But it could not be otherwise; the children could not be taken from their school in the middle of the

12 Draupadi was the daughter of Drupada, king of Panchala, and wife of the five Pandu princes. In the great gambling match which the oldest Pandu prince Yudhishthira played against his cousins, the Kauravas, he lost his all—even their wife Draupadi. Thereupon Duhshasana, one of the Kauravas, abused her, tried to disgrace her and tear off her veil and dress, but the god Krishna took compassion upon her, and restored her garments as fast as they were torn. The episode is narrated in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*.

year. They had to stay in Delhi with Madan and Indu. Babuji developed a cardiac problem.

At last, after Babuji's many letters, the summer vacation came and Madan sent Indu with Kundan, Pashi and Dulari to Saharanpur. Dhuni Ram's world perked up. Before he had been burdened with free time after his office hours; now he had nothing but work! The children, as they are wont to, took off their clothes and left them here and there and Babuji picked them up. Far from her, Madan, like the slow moving Rati<sup>13</sup>, Indu grew careless about her clothing too. She behaved in the kitchen as though she were in a dog pound, face turned outward looking for her master. After doing the housework she napped, sometimes lying on a trunk inside the house, sometimes lying outside near a small rose bay or near the mango tree with its hundreds and thousands of hearts.

The month of Sawan<sup>14</sup> gave way to Bhadun<sup>15</sup>. In the courtyard young women and newly married girls swung happily and sang, "Who has put up a swing in the mango grove?" In the spirit of the song they pushed each other on the swing and played hide-and-seek. The middle-aged women stood and watched from the sidelines; it seemed to Indu that she jelled with them. She turned her face away, sighed and went to sleep. Babuji, if he passed by, would not try to wake her. Instead he took the opportunity to pick up her discarded shalwar, which she always flung over her mother-in-law's old sandalwood box, and hung it on a peg. While doing this he had to be careful that no one was watching him. Occasionally, while picking up the shalwar he would see Bahu's bra lying behind it in the corner. At this sight his courage would fail him, and he would leave the room quickly, as though a young snake had come out

13 The Hindu goddess of sexual pleasures.

14 July-August, first months of monsoon rain in India.

15 August-September, the most pleasant months of the rainy season.

of a hole. Then from the verandah his voice repeating the Vedic hymn, "*Om Namo Bhagavate, Vasudeva...*"<sup>16</sup> could be heard.

The tale of Babuji's daughter-in-law's beauty was spread far and wide by the neighbouring women. When some women spoke in front of Babuji of Bahu's loveliness and well-formed body he responded happily, "We were so lucky, mother of Ami Chand! ...a healthy person has come to our house." Saying this, his thoughts went to his tubercular wife, the bottles of medicine, the hospital steps and the sleepless nights of his children. Then he would think of so many plump children tucked in Bahu's arms, on her thigh, hanging around her neck; and still more coming. Lying on her flanks with her face to the ground and her hips towards the sky, Bahu was releasing children one after another with no difference in their ages or sizes, all alike, twins and more twins. *Om Namo Bhagavate...*

The neighbours all knew that Indu was Babuji's favourite, and jars of milk and buttermilk began to arrive at Dhuni Ram's house. One time Salam Din Gurjar<sup>17</sup> made a special request to Indu: "Bibi<sup>18</sup>, please have my son made a coolie in the R.N.S., and Allah will reward you." It was not long after Indu's single recommendation that Salam Din's son got the job, and that of a sorter, not a coolie. She helped people and when she could not, it was Fate or there were no more vacancies.

Babuji took special care of Indu's food and health. Indu hated to drink milk. At night Babuji himself prepared milk in a small pot, put it in a glass and brought it to Bahu's cot. Indu pulled herself together, rising and saying, "Oh no, Babuji! I will not drink it."

16 "My salutations, Lord Vasudeva..." A Sanskrit Mantra. Vasudeva is an epithet of Krishna: "Son of Vasudeva".

17 One of the milkman castes.

18 'Lady' or 'Wife', a term of address.

"Even your father-in-law will have to drink it," he would joke.

"Please, go ahead and drink it," she laughingly answered,

Babuji retorted with faked anger, "Do you want to suffer later as your mother-in-law did?"

"Yes, yes," she said, but she pretended to be hurt by his words. Why not pretend? Only those who have no one to console them never pretend to be hurt; here all were ready to console her.

When Indu did not take the glass from Babuji's hand he placed it near the head of the bed. "Take it from here, drink if you wish."

Back at his own bed, Dhuni Ram played with Dulari Munni. Dulari rubbed a bare part of Babuji's body with her body, and putting her face to his stomach she made a brrr... ing noise. Darting a look in Bahu's direction, Munni cried out, "The milk will spoil, Babuji, Bhabi is not drinking it!"

"She will drink it, she surely will, daughter." Babuji hugged Pashi with his free arm. "Woman can not bear to see anything in the house spoil."

Hardly was this sentence completed when, "Shoo, you husband eater"<sup>19</sup>! came from Bahu. She had discovered a cat coming for the milk, and she quickly gulped it down herself!

Shortly afterwards Kundan came to Babuji, saying, "Babuji, Bhabi is crying."

"What?" Babuji tried to look through the darkness towards Bahu's bed. He sat up awhile, then lay down again and told Kundan to go on to sleep.

19 A term of abuse.

Lying there, Babu Dhuni Ram could see God's garden through an opening in the sky, and he asked God in his mind, "Of all those blooming flowers, which is the one for me?" The sky changed and became a river of pain, and he heard the sound of continuous shrieks. Hearing them he said, "Since the world was made how much man has cried!" And crying, he went to sleep.

Within 20 days of Indu's leaving, Madan began to lament her. He wrote: "I am sick of always eating bread from the market, and I am constipated. My kidney is beginning to pain." As though he were an office worker needing a leave, he sent a doctor's certificate with the letter, and also a confirming letter from a friend of Babuji's. This brought no results. Finally he sent an urgent wire with reply pre-paid.

The money for the reply was wasted, but no matter.

Indu and the children returned. Madan did not speak pleasantly to Indu for about two days. His mood affected Indu as well. Finding Madan alone one day, she held him. "Why are you sulking like this? What have I done?" Madan was annoyed with her and replied brusquely.

"Leave me, go on—out of sight, you unworthy woman!"

"Did you call me back to say such things to me?"

"Yes!"

"Well, say now or forget it."

"Watch out, this is all your fault. If you wanted to come, why did you let Babuji stop you?"

Indu said angrily, "Come now, you are behaving like a child. How could I say anything? Besides, I think that by calling me you were cruel to your father."

"What do you mean?"

"There is no mysterious meaning. He was enjoying life very much with his family."

"And what about my life?"

"Your life? You can be wherever you want," and she spoke so mischievously, looking sideways towards Madan, that the whole power of his defence crumbled. He had been waiting for a good excuse anyway, and now he caught Indu and held her closely.

"Was Babuji happy with you?"

"Oh yes. One day I awoke and saw him standing by my pillow smiling down at me."

"That can not be!"

"I swear by my life..."

"Not by your life, swear by mine."

"I will not swear by your life, even for millions!"<sup>20</sup>

Madan was thinking. "In books they call it sex."

"Sekkus? What is that?" Indu did not know the English word.

"That is what is done between man and woman."

"Oh Ram!" Catching her breath sharply she backed away. "What a dirty thing to say! Aren't you ashamed, talking about Babuji like that?"

"Shouldn't Babuji have been ashamed, looking at you like that?" Madan countered.

"Why?" Indu immediately took Babuji's side. "Why shouldn't he be happy to see his daughter-in-law?"

"Why not indeed, when the daughter-in-law is like you," Madan tried to turn the discussion.

"You have a dirty mind," Indu went on angrily, "That is why your business is crude turpentine. All your books are full of dirt; you and your books can see nothing but sex. When I grew up my father began to love me more, was

20 For a wife to swear by her husband's life is a very serious oath. According to popular belief, if such an oath is taken falsely, the husband may die.

that also that wretched thing, that word you used?" She paused and then continued, "Why don't you call Babuji here since he is not happy alone. He is sad; doesn't that make you sad?"

Madan loved his father very much. As the eldest son he had been profoundly affected by his mother's death: He remembered her very well. When thoughts of her came to his mind, Madan closed his eyes and began praying *Om namo bhagavate, vasudeva, om namo...* Not only did he love his father, he did not want to be deprived of his protection, especially since his business was not yet established. But in a noncommittal tone he said only, "Let Babuji stay there. This is the first chance since our wedding for us to be free with each other."

After three or four days Babuji's tear-smeared letter came. "My dear Madan..." Of this salutation the words "my dear" were washed out by salty tears. He wrote, "Bahu's being here brought back the old days for me. When your mother and I were newly married she too was as playful and youthful. She threw her clothes here and there after undressing, in the same way, and my father collected them. The same sandalwood box. ...the same household chores... I go to the bazaar, come home again, bring groceries and sometimes curd or buttermilk, but now no one is in the house. That place where the sandalwood box stood is empty..." And again half a line was drowned. Finally he had written, "Upon returning home from the office, entering these huge dark rooms, something like dread overcomes me..." And last, "One thought about Bahu, —do not put her in the care of an inexperienced nurse."

Indu caught the letter in her hands. With a catch in her breath, her eyes wide and close to tears from embarrassment, she said, "I could die! How did Babuji know about that?"

Madan grabbed the letter again. "Is Babuji a child? He is seen the world. He fathered his children."

"Yes, but... how many days has it been now?" Indu cast a hasty glance at her stomach, which had not yet begun to swell. As if Babuji or someone else were looking, she pulled the end of her sari over herself. Her thoughts wandered. Her face glowed and she said softly, "Your relatives will send sweets."

"My relatives? Oh yes." Madan followed her thoughts. "But what a shameful thing—Only five or six months, and this fellow is coming!" He motioned towards her stomach.

"Is he coming on his own, or did you bring him?"

"You... it is all your fault. Just like a woman."

"You do not like it?"

"Not at all."

"Why not?"

"We should have enjoyed life for a few more days."

"Isn't this an enjoyment of life?" Indu said in a shocked tone. "Why do men and women get married? God has, given without our asking, hasn't He? Ask those women who have no children—what is it that they do not do? They go to the saints and fakirs, tie threads at tombs and shrines. All modesty leaves them and, naked, they cut reeds along the sides of rivers and raise evil spirits at the burning *ghats*<sup>21</sup>."

"All right," Madan stopped her. "You have begun a long story. Is there such a short life ahead in which to have children?"

"Then when he's born," Indu's tone rebuked him and her finger jabbed at him, "You can not even touch his hand! He will be mine, not yours. You do not need him but your father does, I know that!"

21 Various methods believed to bring pregnancy to a barren woman.

Abashed and shocked at herself, Indu hid her face in her hands. She had thought that the small life within her would provoke sympathy and love from its father, but Madan continued sitting silently. He would not utter even one word. Indu dropped her hands and looked in Madan's direction, and in the special voice of a woman in her first pregnancy she said, "Anyway, what we have been talking about will come afterwards. First, I will not survive; I have been afraid of this since my childhood."

Madan was alarmed. This beautiful thing, who had grown more beautiful with her pregnancy—could she die? He came behind her and clasped her in his arms. "Nothing will happen to you, Indu. I will snatch you even from the jaws of death! It's not Savitri's turn now, but Satyavan's."<sup>22</sup> Clinging to Madan Indu forgot that she had any sorrows.

Babuji wrote nothing for a long time. However, a sorter came from Saharanpur and told them that Babuji had begun having cardiac trouble again and that he had nearly died during one attack. Madan was fearful and Indu began to cry. After the sorter left, Madan closed his eyes and began repeating with all his heart, *Om namo bhagavate....*

The next day Madan wrote a letter to his father. "Babuji, why don't you come home? The children miss you and so does Bahu." But Babuji could not leave his job. He wrote that he was making arrangements for getting leave. Madan's feelings of guilt grew. "If I had let Indu stay with Babuji, it would not have hurt me..."

22 Savitri's story is mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. She married Satyavan in spite of warning by a seer that he would die after a year. On the fatal day, as Satyavan was cutting wood in the forest, he fell ill and died. When Yama, the god of death, took her husband's spirit away, she followed them through the jungle, and pleaded so well for her husband that Yama, touched by her love and devotion, restored Satyavan to life.

It was one night before Vijaya Dashami<sup>23</sup>, and Madan, in a state of anguish, was pacing the verandah outside the middle room. Suddenly he heard the sound of an infant crying from inside. He rushed towards the door just as Begum nurse<sup>24</sup> was coming out saying, "Congratulations Babuji! It's a son!"

"A son?" In a worried voice he continued, "How is my wife?"

"Perfectly all right! I have told her it was a girl though, for if she were too happy she'd have trouble expelling the afterbirth."

Oh... Madan blinked his eyes foolishly and started forward to enter the room. The Begum stopped him. "What business have you inside?" She went back in, closing the door firmly.

Madan's legs had not stopped trembling. Now, not from fear but from happiness, or perhaps because when someone comes into the world, all the people in his neighbourhood tremble. Madan knew that when a son was born the doors and walls of a house begin to tremble as if afraid that when the boy grew up he might sell them rather than keep them. Madan felt as though the walls truly were shaking...

Chakli Bhabi had not come for the delivery because her own children were very young, but Daryabadi Phupi had arrived. During the delivery she had chanted "Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram"; now the soft repetition died out.

Never in his life had Madan felt himself to be so superfluous and useless. Just then the door opened again and Phupi came out. In the faint light of the verandah her

23 A festival celebrating the anniversary of Rama's victory over the demon Ravana; generally falls on the tenth day of a lunar fortnight. Hence, called the Vijaya Dashami— "Victorious tenth".

24 Term of address to Muslim midwife.

face seemed that of a ghost, completely milky white. Madan blocked her path. "Indu is all right, isn't she, Phupi?"

"She is fine, she is fine," Phupi reassured him, placing her trembling hands on Madan's head and kissing him. She moved on past him. She went straight to the room where the other children were sleeping, lovingly placed a hand on each head and murmured something, with her eyes lifted to the roof. Worn out, she lay face down next to Munni. From her trembling shoulders Madan could guess that she was crying. He was astonished, Phupi had seen to many deliveries; why was she so shaken in her soul now?

The smell of burning harmal<sup>25</sup> drifted from the inner room, like a cloud of smoke, enveloping Madan. He felt dizzy. The nurse came out with some clothes; lots of blood was on them and a few drops fell on the floor. Madan was dazed. He did not know where he was. His eyes were open but he perceived nothing. From the distance came a faint cry from Indu and the crying of the baby.

The next three or four days were busy ones. Digging a hole away from the house, Madan buried the afterbirth. He stopped the dogs from digging too, and of what happened after that he remembered almost nothing. It seemed to him that from the moment the scent of the harmal entered his nostrils he had lost consciousness, and he regained it only after losing those four days. Now he was alone in his room with Indu... like Nand and Yashoda... and also Nand Lal<sup>26</sup>. Indu looked at the child and speculated, "He resembles you exactly."

25 A disinfectant herbal seed which is put on burning charcoal to purify the air.

26 Nand and Yashoda were the foster parents of Krishna. Allusion here is made to the great care and affection they bestowed on the child Krishna when he was secretly left under their protection to avoid death at the hands of the tyrannical King Kansa. Hence the name Nand Lal, i.e., the son of Nand.

"That may be." Casting a fleeting glance at the child Madan continued, "All I can say is thank God you were saved."

"Yes," she began, "I always thought that..."

"Do not say anything inauspicious!" Madan cut in "After this experience I will not come near you again!" He pressed his tongue against his teeth in repentance.

"You would better take that back," Indu smiled as she said it.

Madan covered his ears with his hands, and Indu began laughing gently.

After the birth of the child, Indu's navel did not return to its proper place for several days. It rambled around looking for the child which had gone out into the world and had forgotten its true mother. But then a readjustment took place and Indu gazed at the world peacefully. She emerged like a goddess, forgiving the sins not only of Madan but of all sinners in the world, and she made offerings of pity and compassion. She became slender after the delivery and seemed to Madan even lovelier than before. As he gazed at her, she suddenly placed her hands on her breasts.

"What is it?" Madan asked.

"Nothing," Indu said, trying to raise herself a little. "He's hungry." She motioned towards the child.

"He? Hungry?" Madan looked first at the child and then at Indu. "How do you know?"

"Don't you see?" She looked downward. "It is all wet." Madan saw the milk oozing through her loose gown and smelled a familiar scent. Indu stretched her arms towards the baby. "Give him to me."

Madan reached into the cradle but hesitated momentarily. Mustering his courage, he lifted the child as though it were a dead rat and put him in Indu's lap. Indu asked shyly, "Would you go outside?"

"Why? Why should I go out?"

"Please go," Indu pouted and said modestly, "I can not give the baby milk in front of you."

"What?" Madan was astonished. "In front of me why not?" And shaking his head as though he still did not understand, he went outside. Reaching the door he turned and glanced at Indu. She had never seemed so beautiful as at that moment.

Babu Dhuni Ram came home on leave, but he appeared only a shadow of his former self. When Indu put his grandson in his lap he seemed happy. But he had developed an ulcer which troubled him day and night. If it had not been for the child, Babuji's condition would have been far worse. Several treatments were attempted. In the last one the doctor gave him 15 to 20 coin-sized pills every day. The first day he perspired so much that he had to change clothes three or four times. Each time Madan took the clothes and squeezed them in a bucket, which was one fourth full from only the perspiration. At night Babuji began to feel nauseated and called out, "Bahu, bring my toothbrush, the taste is very bad." Bahu came running, bringing the toothbrush. Babuji sat up, using the toothbrush, when suddenly he doubled over and a torrent of blood came out. Madan helped him lie back on the pillow, but the pupils of his eyes had turned upward and in a moment he had reached the Garden of Heaven where he recognized his own flower. This happened only three weeks after Munna's birth.

But Indu scratched her face and beat her head and breasts until they were blue. Before Madan's eyes was the same scene which he had seen in the dream of his own death. The only differences were that Indu took her bangles off instead of breaking them; there were no ashes on her head, but dust from the earth and her tangled hair gave her face a desperate look. And instead of crying,

"Oh neighbours, I have been ruined," she cried, "Oh neighbours, we have been ruined!"

Madan did not yet realise how great was the burden of the household which had now fallen on him. He collapsed completely until the next morning. Perhaps he would have been lost if he had not stayed outside and lain face down on the dampened earth next to the drain, which somehow consoled him. Mother Earth took her child to her breast and saved him. The children, Kundan, Dulari, Munni and Pashi, were like tiny chicks whose nest was attacked by a hawk; they raised their beaks and cheeped helplessly. If there were any feathers to give them shelter, they were Indu's...

Lying on the side of the drain, Madan thought, "Now this world is ended for me. Can I go on living? Will I be able to laugh again?" He rose and went into the house.

The bathroom was under the stairs; pushing in and closing the door behind him, he again asked himself this question. "Will I be able to laugh again?" And he suddenly was laughing loudly, though his father's body was lying very near him in the living room.

Before lighting the funeral pyre, Madan lay prostrate on the ground in front of his father's body. It was his last salutation to the one who had given him life. But he was not crying. Seeing this, the relatives and neighbours joining in the mourning were astonished and silent. According to Hindu law, Madan as the eldest son had to light the pyre, and later break open the burnt skull. The women standing at the edge of the burning *ghat* washed themselves at the well and returned to their homes. When Madan reached home he was trembling. Whatever strength Mother Earth had given to her son changed to fear with the coming night. He needed support, support stronger than the power of Death. The daughter of Mother Earth, Indu,

like Sita coming out of an earthen vessel<sup>27</sup>, embraced this Ram in her arms; had Indu not given herself completely to Madan that night, the terrible sadness might have killed him.

Within ten months Indu gave birth to her second son. Having pushed his wife again into the fires of hell, Madan forgot his own sorrow. Sometimes he would think that if he had not called Indu back from Babuji, Babuji would have lived longer—but soon he was busy making up the loss caused by his father's death. His business, nearly closed because of his inattention, now got off to a good start.

During these days Indu went to her parents' home, the younger baby clinging to her breasts and the older boy left with Madan. Left behind, Munna proved very obstinate, sometimes getting his way, sometimes not. Indu wrote letters: "I hear the crying of my son. Are you beating him?" This astounded Madan. She was an ignorant, illiterate woman. How could she write a thing like this? Once more he found himself questioning her; had she been tutored?

Years passed. Often there was not enough money for extra pleasures, but there was sufficient for the household needs. The family faced difficulties when a big expense came up, like Kundan's admission fee or the giving of Dulari Munni's engagement presents. On such occasions Madan sat with downcast face. Indu approached him and asked smilingly, "Why are you worried?"

"Why shouldn't I be worried? You know Kundan's B.A. admission fee and Munni's..."

Indu only laughed.

"Come with me."

27 Sita was daughter of Janaka, and wife of Rama, the Vaishnava god. According to popular belief she was found in a clay vessel in a field, when Janaka was ploughing; hence referred to as the daughter of the Earth. She was the only wife of Rama, and is considered the embodiment of purity, tenderness, and conjugal affection. Her legend is narrated in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*.

Madan followed her like a lamb, to the sandalwood box which no one, not even Madan, had permission to touch. Sometimes this made him angry. He often said, "When you die you will take this along, clasped to your breast." She always replied, "Yes, I certainly will."

Now Indu took from the sandalwood box the necessary amount of money and put it before Madan.

"Where did this come from?"

"From nowhere special.... You are concerned with eating the mangoes, not with counting the trees, aren't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"So go along to your work."

When Madan insisted she only laughed and said, "I have a rich friend, don't you think that's it?" Madan did not like this joke, though he knew it was a lie. So Indu changed her story, "I am a robber, a generous one who steals with one hand and gives to the poor with the other."

Thus Munni's wedding was financed; Indu sold even her own ornaments. A debt was incurred and paid off. And Kundan's wedding was also celebrated.

In these weddings Indu took the place of the mother and performed the 'hand-filling' ceremony<sup>28</sup>. From the sky Babuji and his wife looked on and threw down flowers which no one could see. But it so happened that these two began to quarrel. Mother said to Babuji, "You have eaten the food cooked by Bahu and you have had her serve you. I am so unfortunate that I have not even seen her!" This argument reached the ears of Vishnu and even Siva. The gods supported the right of the mother and decided to send her to the world of mortals. She was put in the womb of Indu, and so a daughter was born to Madan and Indu.

<sup>28</sup> Name of a part of the Hindu marriage ceremony where the hands of the bride and bridegroom are joined, usually by the mother of the bride.

Indu was scarcely a goddess, for she would even fight with Madan himself about matters of principle or about the children. Angered at this streak of obstinacy Madan called her "Harischandra's daughter"<sup>29</sup>. Whatever the factual differences of opinion, Madan and the others in the family had to submit to Indu since her stand was always based on truth and dharma. Even if the quarrel was prolonged, and Madan was able to reject all her statements with husbandly sureness, in the end he came to Indu and asked for her forgiveness.

After Kundan's marriage, a new sister-in-law came to the house. Though she was a wife, Indu was first of all a woman, then a wife; in contrast, the younger Rani was just a wife, although called a woman. Because of Rani the brothers quarrelled, and the household items were divided through the offices of the J.P. uncle. In this division of the joint family, the property left by the parents and Indu's own belongings were indiscriminately mixed. Indu suffered in silence and maintained her calmness. After gaining a separate household, Kundan and Rani were still not happy. But soon in Indu's new house neither happiness nor household goods were lacking.

Indu did not regain her health after the birth of her daughter. The child continually clung to Indu's breasts. While the others looked down on this small lump of flesh, Indu gave her loving attention, but sometimes she, too, became distressed and thrust the child into the cradle. She scolded her saying, Why don't you let me live, "mother"? and the little girl would cry.

Madan started avoiding Indu. Despite the security and warmth of his marriage, he still felt he had not met the woman he truly desired. The crude turpentine was selling well and Madan could spend many rupees without telling

29 Harishchandra is a legendary king celebrated for his piety, truthfulness and justice. Stories about him are told in the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*.

Indu. After Babuji's death there was no one to question him; he was completely free. It was as if his neighbour Sabta's buffalo sniffed at Madan's face once more. The buffalo of that wedding night was sold, but its owner was alive. Madan began to go with Sabta to those places where light and shadow make strange forms. Sometimes a dark triangle in the corner was quickly pierced by a four-cornered wave of light from above. No view seemed complete. It seemed that a pajama came from the armpit and flew towards the sky, or a coat completely covered the observer's face and he struggled for breath. When the square wave of light formed a frame, a figure came and stood in it. The observer stretched out his hands—and the figure crossed to the other side, as if nothing were there. From the rear a dog began to howl, but its voice was drowned in the beat of drums coming from above.

Madan knew the features of his ideal, but every time he thought he had found it the artist had drawn one wrong line, or the sound of the laughter was higher than it should have been. Madan was lost in the search for spotless beauty and perfect art.

One day Sabta was reproached by his wife. She presented Madan to him as the perfect husband; not presented, but threw it in his face. Sabta hit back in the same way, as if with a bloody watermelon whose nerves and fibres stuck in her nose, eyes, and ears. Then shouting countless curses, the Begum took the kernel and marrow from the basket of her memory and threw them into Indu's clean courtyard.

Out of the shock two Indus emerged. One was Indu herself and the other was an angry aggressive personality. Whenever Madan returned home he came to the house to wash, put on clean clothes, and chew a pair of Mughlai pan<sup>30</sup> with spicy tobacco. On this day when he returned,

30 Kind of pan, betel leaf, especially good.

he found an Indu who looked quite different. She had dabbed powder on her face, rouge on her cheeks and, not having lipstick, bindi<sup>31</sup> pigment on her lips. Her hair had been done so beautifully that Madan could not stop staring at it.

"What is going on today?" he asked with astonishment.

"Nothing," she replied, meeting his stare. "I had some leisure time today, that is all."

After 15 years of marriage, Indu had some leisure time for her make-up! During those years wrinkles had appeared on her face and two or three rolls of flesh showed below her sari blouse.

But today she had performed her toilet with such care that not one of these faults was visible. Carefully dressed in a lovely sari, she seemed utterly beautiful. "This can not be!" Madan thought with a jolt. He turned towards Indu for another look, as a horse trader turns towards a faultless mare. She was an older mare, but she wore a red bridle.... Whatever faulty lines the figure had were not evident to his intoxicated eyes. Indu was truly beautiful even after 15 years of marriage; Phulan, Rashidah, Mrs. Roberts, and all the other women were but water carriers compared to Indu! Madan began to feel compassion, and a certain fear.

Though the sky was not cloudy it began to rain. The Ganges of domestic life appeared to be in flood, and its water overflowed the banks and took the whole valley and its inhabitants into its fold. The water flowed with such speed that it seemed even the Himalayas would be drowned. The baby began to cry, as she had never cried before and upon hearing this, Madan closed his eyes; when he opened them, she was standing before him, now a young girl. No, no, it was Indu. Her mother's daughter,

31 Bindi is the red beauty mark applied mostly by married Hindu women on the forehead.

or her daughter's mother, who was smiling with the corners of her eyes and seeing from the corners of her lips.

In the room where one day the odour of burning harmal had made Madan dizzy, today the fragrance of khas<sup>32</sup> confused him. A little rain could be more dangerous than heavy downpour; water seeped through the rafters and started dripping between Madan and Indu. But Madan was still lost. In his excitement his eyes shrank and his breathing became abnormally rapid.

"Indu...." His voice was several notes higher than on the wedding night.

Indu, not looking at him, answered, "Yes," and her voice was several notes lower. It was *amavas*, the night of no moon.

Before Madan's hands had reached out, she moved to him. He lifted her chin and examined her face, seeing what he had lost—or what he had found. Indu looked once at his darkening face and closed her eyes.

"What is this?" He was startled. "Your eyes are swollen!" "It is nothing." She gestured towards the baby. "That wretched 'Mother' kept me awake all night."

The baby had been quiet, almost seeming to hold her breath and observing what was happening. The rainfall ceased—had it truly ceased? Madan looked thoughtfully at Indu's eyes.

"Yes, but... these tears?"

"They are of happiness. Tonight is mine." And she clung to Madan laughing shakily.

With a surge of physical pleasure, he gripped her and said, "Today my deepest wish has been fulfilled, Indu, after so many years, I always wanted..."

"But you did not tell me—you remember I asked something of you the night of our wedding?"

32 A local perfume.

"Yes. Give me your sorrows," Madan replied. "But you did not ask anything of me."

"I?" The idea was strange to him. "What could I have asked? Whatever I wished you have given me. You loved my family, looked after the education of my brothers and arranged their marriages, gave birth to my dear children—all these you have given me!"

"I too thought that that was enough," Indu replied, "but now I know that it is not."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing..." she hesitated. Then, "I kept back one thing."

"What did you keep?"

She was silent for a time, looking away from him. "My modesty—my happiness—you should have told me, 'give me your happiness', and then I...." she couldn't continue. Finally she added, "And now I have nothing."

Madan's hands softened. He felt as though he had been driven into the ground. This illiterate woman? Was it a tutored speech? But no—this had come from the furnace of life, and the fiery sparks were flying all around them.

After a while Madan spoke, "I understand, Indu."

Weeping, Indu and Madan embraced each other. Indu took Madan's hands and led him to that world usually not reached by humans until after death.

*Translated by Karen Leonard and Gopi Chand Narang from the original Urdu "Apne Dukh Mujhe De Do".*



## THE SERMONS OF HAJI GUL BABA BEKTASHI

*Qurratulain Hyder*

All night long they had been singing qawwalis in Azerbaijani Turkish. Before daybreak the voices receded in the grey Caucasian mist. I came out of the serai and looked at the sky for the Rock. But instead of the bird which was to take me home, there came a *dove*, flying straight from the direction of *Mount Ararat*. It carried a letter in its beak. It perched itself on top of the samovar which the inn-keeper had brought out in the vine-covered courtyard. Then it looked around with its beady eyes till its glance fell on me.

The dove dropped an envelope near me and flew away.

"Hanum, perchance this is a message for you from the Rock. It may have postponed its flight," said the old inn-keeper.

"Perchance it is a message from one of the distressed. They are seeking the whereabouts of their loved ones reported missing. For some reason, I keep getting these epistles all the time," I replied.

"May be! The wars are on, all the time," exclaimed the old man of the Qafqaz, who looked like Tolstoy's Haji Murad. He was contentedly puffing at his hookah. "Which one is this?"

I picked up the letter and read it. Then I decided that the time had come when, in order to begin the *search*, I must go back to the *beginning*.

Therefore, I took off my everyday mask, bid adieu to Haji Murad and began walking towards the *Ararat* which stood there glistening right in front, but in fact was *far away*.

I walked all day and crossed many a valley and mountain stream and came upon a twilight spring. It was perhaps the spring of the Waters of Life where Alexander had met Khwaja Khizr who, like St. Christopher, guides those who have lost their way. He also meets the *seekers* by river banks; And it came to pass that near the spring I *did* see a blue-eyed faqir saying his prayers. As is the custom of those lands, he wore full boots like the Don Cossacks. His white felt cap and striped smock indicated that he belonged to the vanished fraternity of Bektashi dervishes.

As the sun went down, he finished his prayers and looked up. He saw me and said "Ya Hoo"—O Eternal One—which was the greeting of his Order. Then all of a sudden he began speaking as though some one had turned on an invisible tape-recorder. The dervish said: "I travel by the strange light which is neither of the earth nor of the skies and is made up of the celestial colours of Allah's 99 mystical names. And know, that the living are already dead and the dead continue to live and the skulls are singing in luminous caves. When their singing turns into the sound of the seas I return to my cell in the pine woods and wait. Day and night I turn the grindstone of the fear of God and take out the corn from the grindstone of his Will. Hanum, what is it that you seek?"

"Effendum," I said respectfully, "I come to you as the emissary of an unknown woman. From her distant river-country she has sent me this message: 'The waves of my river return again and again but time does not come back. Autumn winds sing in the auburn leaves. Dry twigs crackles and burn and wild ducks are crying in the marshes. Minds continue to live while the bodies have died...'"

"Two years ago I lost my man and nobody can tell me if he is still in the world of the living or was made to *cross over*. Madame, you who are roaming the lands of the Turks, you may perhaps come across a man of God who *know...*"

While I read out the epistle, the dervish folded his hands over his stomach and had hung his head as though in prayer. Then he raised his clear blue eyes and spoke: "Hanum, not very far from here, in the land of Hungary, there is—or was—the tomb of my revered ancestor, Haji Gul Baba Naqshbandi. Time was when prince and commoner from Istanbul and Bokhara, Tirana and Sofia, trekked on foot to the Carpathians to pray at his shrine. Now mademoiselle, I go there and come back and tell you what I can tell."

He stood under a cypress tree, his hands tucked inside his overlong sleeves. After a few moments he opened his eyes and said: "I saw things at the holy tomb by the Danube. I saw the past and I saw the future. When my great-grandfather Haji Adnan Effendi accompanied a caravan of diplomats of Cathy, on the way to Yarkand he came across a dervish of the Order founded by Bektash Quli—servant of God. The dervish walked a little above the ground, for he was one of those sufis who can fly. And he turned to my great-grandfather and said: 'Take care. Take very great care'. Then he walked into a way-side Naqshbandi hospice and the same moment emerged *on the other side* and entered the Samarkand Museum. He stands

in a glass-case of that museum in Samarkand, Uzbek SSR. His eyes have turned to glass."

I did not fully understand what he meant. I casually asked this Bektashi sufi his name.

"Haji Selim at your service, Hanum," he said bowing low. "Come with me. I will do what I can do for the unfortunate woman."

He picked up his staff and tied a seven-cornered stone in his belt of white wool and began to walk like my shadow, a little ahead of me.

We reached an orchard where a red-roofed hut stood on the green bank of Lake Van. The *qalander* which means "a soul of pure gold" left me standing on the steps and swept in.

He did not come out for a while. I was scared. I tiptoed to a window and peeped inside.

I saw a bare room with a wooden floor and low ceiling with black rafters. An old French stove made of porcelain stood in a corner. Beside it there lay a tambura and a flute—which I knew represented the spiritual flute of Jelaluddin Rumi. Two identical-looking sufis sat on an Azerbaijani rug. They faced each other and sat in absolute silence.

Then one of them got up and faced the direction which was perhaps the direction of Medina in the south and untied the stone from his stomach and opened the belt made of white wool. And I knew that the stone represented the stone tied by the Prophet to his stomach because, being very poor, he often went hungry. And the dervish began to perform a Bektashi rite. He repeatedly made a knot in the belt and opened it and recited: "I tie up evil and release goodness. And I tie up ignorance and open up the fear of God. And I tie up hunger and unknot contentment. And I cut my harvest with the sickle of

humility and grow old in knowledge and sow the seeds of learning. And I bake my bread in the oven of patience..."

I stepped back from the window and raised my face to the sky and shouted another Bektashi prayer: "O Bektash," I cried, "You who have no family tree and neither begotten nor do you beget! O Bektash! You move with the revolving times and can hear the sound of the ant crawling on black stone in dark nights..." then I slowly added my own message: "Only, O Bektash, You do not hear the cries of the oppressed and the exploited..."

But my voice was drowned in the chants of Selim Effendi and his spiritual alter ego. They intoned: "O Al-Mustafa. O Chosen One... who always walked under the shade of a luminous cloud... O Prophet... have mercy on the world..."

The room echoed with the cries of "Karim Allah... Ya Hoo..."

The next moment Selim Effendi came out carrying a jar and an earthen cup. And then I also said something quite irrelevant: "Effendum, In my far-away land, in our crumbling old ancestral house, we have a large basement. In the basement there are stacks of old books and an old and cracked French stove made of rose-patterned porcelain. And intellectually-inclined mice nibble at the books printed in Constantinople, 1872, London E.C. 4, 1873, and Russell Square, 1952. And once on a frosty afternoon in his publisher's office in Russell Square the Great Sufi of the Feringhees had discussed with me the Dancing Dervishes... Considering that you are one of them, can you tell me more about your vanished Order...?"

The qalander bowed his head and wept. Then he wiped his tears and said something equally off the point. He said: "Hanum, I cry because in accordance with the Law of God, my alter ego will die exactly 40 days before

my death. What will I do during those 40 days? Because he keeps *warning* me".

Suddenly he shouted, "Ali had said: whatever is ever written shall *remain*."

"Effendum, whatever has been written can be dangerous. Here as well as *There*, because, every letter, as you know, has its Power."

The dervish nodded.

"Look, when that Imam of the Time signed his orders, the powerful genii of his name went forth and destroyed... Brains were blown out and bodies torn to pieces. Effendum... Could you please tell me where he is... if he is still in the world of the living? What shall I write to her?"

"I told you. Take *very great* care."

"The unknown woman writes: His name was Abdul Mansur and he was a painter."

"Didn't he run towards the woods to save his skull?"

"No. The woman writes that he was painting wild ducks by a lotus pond."

"He was being very stupid," Haji Selim replied briefly.

"And thousands ran towards the marshes and forests and riverways. And the earth slipped from under their feet and swords hung over their heads..."

"There is no sword except Ali's holy sword, Zulfiqar," Haji Selim replied.

I fell silent.

"Was this man alone when the end came?"

"No. It was a festival of death."

"Where did this happen?"

"Everywhere. It happens everywhere all the time, East West North South. For Bektash has His Face in all directions."

Haji Selim Effendi looked at me intently. "Hanum, are you not one of those who believe?"

I made no answer and resumed. "And millions—they crossed the frontiers. They came in silence from the east and after a while returned in the same silence. Nothing has made much difference to them and they continue to live in misery as ever..."

"And when nothing much happened even *afterwards*, I thought: It is written that you get the answers in the inner light if you make the Haj pilgrimage of your own soul. I did so. But found no sort of light."

"You probably have the seal of Ignorance on your heart. Now for the unknown woman's sake I shall do what I can do." He poured a little water from the jar into the cup and recited a Bektashi prayer: "There is no god but God and Mohammed is His Prophet and Ali is His Friend and Mehdi is the Last Imam and Moses is the Word of God and Jesus the Spirit of God... Now Hanum, look in the water..."

"Why? Have you found the Cup of Jamshid?" I asked.  
"Hanum, look in the water."

I looked hard and said, "But, Effendum, this has nothing to do with what I am looking for. I only see a horse-drawn carriage. It is crossing a papery Japanese sort of bridge. And a puppet sits inside, wearing a Noh mask. And the coachman has no face. Yes. The coachman has no face. Effendum, it seems to be a place near Nara or Kyoto... of the Shoguns' times... You know what I mean... Oh well, and it is so quiet you can hear the dew falling on cherry blossoms. Yes, and now a fragile canoe is sailing in the distance on a misty river and there are seemingly delicate mountains and a reed hut half hidden in the bamboos and a little man sits in the verandah painting..."

in infinite loneliness... Effendum, I am afraid all this looks suspiciously like Zen...?

"Zen is correct too..." he said, raising his head. "Look again carefully. Is it a fragile canoe or a tank...?"

"Effendum... the water in this cup of yours has turned red."

Haji Selim picked up the vessel and went down to the shore. He threw the cup in the waters of Lake Van and came back wiping his hands on his overlong sleeves. Then he sat down on the steps of the hut and chanted: "I grind the grindstone of the fear of God and tie up evil and release goodness and tie up hatred—Was that person, Abul Mansur, a human being or a symbol?"

"Both," I replied.

Haji Selim bowed his head and began to cry again.

"Shall I write to that woman to bake her bread in the oven of patience?" I asked. "Effendum, now I return to Shahjehanabad. You may also trek back to Istanbul to your Takia Mevlevi in Pera or Topekapu or the Khanquah Oghlu Ali Pasha".

"Hanum, I have nowhere to go to. All the 256 Takias of Constantinople were closed down by the orders of the Imam of Modern Times. Some of the Takias have their models in the glass-cases of the museums of Istanbul," he said and continued weeping.

"Well, Effendum, wherever you return, tell Him that His servants have suffered as in *hell*. And continue to suffer. Now you can say your Isha prayers."

"We Bektashis do not simply pray. We *crucify* ourselves. We call our prayers 'the crucifixion of Mansur'. Day after day I ascend the cross, get down, die, and resurrect myself. That is something you will never do. So you will not *know*. Day after day I tie up impatience and release

patience. God is patient because He is eternal. We become impatient because we have short lives."

I said rather irreverently, "Effendum, do you remember Haji Yusuf Bektashi of Spain of many centuries ago? Well, he and his disciples remained patient but that did not help when disaster struck his country and his people..."

Haji Selim did not take any notice of my remark and continued: "And I travel by the light of God's 99 Beautiful Names—*Hoo* which is the colour for red and *Wahid* which is the colour of green and *Aziz* whose light is black and *Wadood* which is non-light. Haji Selim Bektashi's conversation is over."

The invisible tape-recorder began to produce weird noises as though it was being played backwards. *For existence is divided into many planes.*

Haji Selim had disappeared behind the closed door of his Takia. I tiptoed to the window and saw that the two identical-looking sufis—Selim Effendi and his spiritual alter ego—who had sat facing each other, turned into paper. A gust of wind coming from the Ararat shook the wooden hut and the dervishes blew away and floated around like bits of old yellow paper. The colours vanished into non-light.

The Rock descended on Tughlaqabad and spread its wings. I got off and came into town, I thought, before I begin the search anew for the unknown woman's man, I must repair my worn-out mask.

The city looked changed although I had not been away long. And I could not find my way to the newest capital on the site of Indraprastha. So I asked a passer-by: "O Brother Passerby, can you direct me to a place where I can get my mask repaired?"

"Honourable sister, over the site of Princess Qutluq Nigar Khanum's grave there is an air-conditioned beauty parlour. It is run by She who once appeared in Rider Haggard's novels. She should be able to help you."

So I walked down to this ultramodern building which stood over the grave of Qutluq Nigar Khanum and I saw a big crowd collected in front, as though some one had died. I went inside and saw a number of bejewelled women sitting in a row, their heads stuck under monstrous machines. More were arriving—like in the lands of the Feringhees corpses arrive at the morticians.

I was terrified and rushed back to the evening street and decided to make do with my old mask. I was accosted by a thin young man with a goatee. He spoke in a flat voice: "O honourable confused-looking sister. I am a visitor from a foreign land. I want to eat. Can you direct me to a place where I can get good river fish?"

So I took him to a restaurant buzzing with the phoney foreign accents of men and women who looked alike. As a matter of fact women looked like men and men like coy young girls. It was, I remembered, called the Unisex Look. Some of the women looked like high priestesses of weird cults.

The foreigner with the goatee sat down at the table and said that although he was a friend and an ally and a government guest, he would like to pay for his food. I said, "O Brother Ally, I appreciate your sense of self-respect. I notice that you are not over-burdened with the sense of gratitude and hold your head high. Tell me, what are you doing in Shahjehanabad, away from your golden land?—A fish out of water as it were."

He looked out of the plate-glass window of the inn. Through this window the crumbling tombs of some of the old Turki kings of Ind looked like Royal Academy

paintings by Thomas Daniel. Inside some of the tombs the poor had made their dwellings and were busy cooking their food, and living out their sordid lives. Because all is Zen anyway and Bektash has His Face everywhere.

All of a sudden the young man with the goatee began speaking in the voice of Haji Selim Effendi. He said: "The Country we have left behind for a while lives in us. The puppets descend on the stage tied to strings. The puppeteer pulls up one and lets down another."

And like Selim Effendi I answered, "That is also correct."

Then I took out the unknown woman's letters from my bag and said, "Brother, the dead are dreaming of the living and the living of the dead. And the pictures of pictures continue to exist. Since you have come from the river-country perchance you have heard of the name of the Artist, Abul Mansur..."

The young man continued to eat because Food is the greatest single reality between birth and death, Beginning and End—although we had been told to tie up hunger and release contentment so that some people could eat more than the others. So I asked the young man, "Why have you come to this patient land of ours and what are you looking for?"

"Is search necessary?" he asked stoically. "I have come here on a scholarship offered to me by your government to learn the art of acting, of which you people are great experts."

"Are you from a family of those who wear masks and pretend to be somebody else? In other words, is your father also an actor?"

"My father painted wild ducks."

"Is he still among the living?"

The young man looked bored. He said, "I suspect that my lady mother has written to you as well. For the last two years she has been collecting addresses and writing to all manner of people seeking the whereabouts of my father. She would not believe that my father, he was taken out of the house at 5 O'clock in the morning and shot dead. Inquisitive lady, now I take your leave. You can continue to look at your ancient many-layered Capital through the windows of this inn."

He rose and went out and was lost in the evening crowds of Shahjehanabad.

It had started raining. I came to the window and heard the clutter of hooves. And I saw the horse-carriage appear from behind the tomb of Qutluq Nigar Khanum. The carriage passed by and the coachman turned around and looked at me. He, of course, had no face. So I quickly touched my own face and was satisfied that the mask was in place. But I had this odd feeling that I was not even pretending. I was a puppet or a character in a Noh play which nobody understood.

Beloved Friends. This is a riddle set before his disciples by Haji Gul Baba Naqshbandi. He taught through parables ancient and modern When he lived in his famous hospice by the Danube, six centuries ago.

"And at this stage my melody is over. O worlds, take your leave and go back..." said Maulana Jelaluddin Rumi and put down his flute.

*Translated from the Urdu by the author*



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Anand, Mulk Raj** (1905–2004) was an eminent English novelist, short-story writer and art critic, with more than 50 published works. His novels *The Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud* established him as a major writer of Indian English fiction. He was a recipient of Padma Bhushan (1967) and Sahitya Akademi Award (1971) for his novel *Morning Face*. He was President of Lalit Kala Akademi and was a Fellow of Lalit Kala Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi and Sahitya Akademi.

**Ashokamitran** (1931–2017) was the pen name of Jagadisa Thyagarajan, an Indian writer regarded as one of the most influential figures in post-independent Tamil literature. A distinguished essayist and critic, he was the editor of the literary journal *Kanaiyaazhi*. He wrote over 200 short stories, nine novels, and some 15 novellas, besides other prose writings. He was a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, NTR National Literary Award and Akshara Award among others.

**Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar** (1898–1971) was a distinguished Bengali novelist and short-story writer with more than 60 books to his credit including a number of plays and books for children; some of his important works are *Arogya Niketan*, *Ganadevata*, *Saptapadi*, etc. He was a recipient of Sharat Smriti and Rabindra Smriti Awards, Jagattarini Medal of Calcutta University, (the highest honour for a creative writer in Bengali), Sahitya Akademi Award (1956) and Jnanpith Award. Honoured with Padma Bhushan, he was a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi.

**Bedi, Rajinder Singh** (1915–1984) was an eminent progressive Urdu fiction-writer, playwright and Hindi film director.

screenwriter and dialogue writer. He wrote two scripts, *Mirza Ghalib* and *Anuradha* which won him President Award (twice); his first collection of short stories *Dana O Daam* followed by *Grehan* and *Haath Hamare Kalam Hue*; also wrote several plays and novels; his Urdu novel *Ek Chadar Maili Si* was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965.

**Bora, Lakshminandan** (1932–2021) was a renowned Assamese writer who had authored 29 novels and 26 short story collections, some of which have been best-sellers for a number of years. He was a recipient of the prestigious Saraswati Samman, Sahitya Akademi Award and Assam Valley Literary Award.

**Chaudhari, Raghuveer** is an eminent Gujarati and Hindi writer. He has more than 80 published books to his credit. He retired as Professor and Head, Department of Hindi, Gujarat University. He served in the Executive Board and General Council of Sahitya Akademi and was appointed as a jury member of the 25th Indian Film Festival. He was the President of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad. He is a recipient of numerous awards and honours like Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, Gaurav Puraskar, Darshak Foundation Award and Sahitya Akademi's Fellowship which is its highest honour.

**Daimari, Nandeswar** is a renowned Bodo fiction writer, and has 15 published books to his credit. He is a recipient of several awards including Fwrdanna Daimari Award, Hayenni Sifung Promod Ch. Brahma Award, Boro Khuga Thunlaini Oja, Sukumar Basumatari Award and Sahitya Akademi Award. His writings are regularly published in various Assamese and Bodo newspapers and magazines.

**Deka, Harekrishna** is an eminent Assamese poet, short-story writer and literary critic. He has more than ten published works to his credit, including *Prakshanta Rashmi*, *Swarobor*, etc. He is a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for the poetry collection, *Aaj Ejon* in 1989, Katha Award.

**Detha, Vijay Dan** (1926–2013) was an eminent folklorist and fiction writer in Rajasthani and Hindi. He was a recipient of

Sahitya Chudamani Award, Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Shri among others. He was Fellow of Sahitya Akademi.

**Devibharathi** (Nallamuthu Rajasekaran) is an eminent writer, playwright, journalist and screenwriter in Tamil. He served as Junior Assistant at Educational Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Executive Editor of *Kalachuvadu*, a Tamil literary monthly, and Creative Consultant at Puthu Yugam Television. He has around 100 publications to his credit including *Pirakoru Iravu*, *Nilalin Thanimai*, *Natraj Maharaj*, *Noiyal*, *Kan Vilitha Marunaal*. He is a recipient of several prestigious awards and honours, namely, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Tamil Nadu Arts and Literary Association Award, Kalaignar Porkizhi Viruthu Award of Government of Tamil Nadu and Sahitya Akademi Award.

**Devi, Mahasweta** (1926–2016) was a distinguished Bengali writer and social activist. She had more than 60 published works that include novels, short stories, plays, biographies and children's literature. Her novel *Hazar Churasir Ma* and the short story "Rudali" have been made into feature films and stories like "Stanodayini" have internationally been acclaimed. She was a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award and Ramon Magsaysay Award, and also received the highest civilian awards from French and Italian governments. She was honoured with Padma Vibhushan.

**Duggal, Kartar Singh** (1917–2012) was a writer with equal felicity in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and English; served in high government posts including the Planning Commission of India. He had 22 collections of short stories, 10 novels, two collections of poetry, seven plays, more than 50 short plays, an autobiography and several works to literary criticism; recipient of Ghalib Award, Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award, Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid Award and Soviet Land Nehru Award, Punjabi Writer of the Millennium Award of Government of Punjab; Padma Bhushan in 1988, and was nominated as Member of Parliament. He was a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi.

**Hembrom, Sunder Manoj** is a noted Santhali fiction writer. He started publishing his stories in Santhali magazines such as *Jug*

*Sirijol, Hul Sombad, Sandes* and *Nawa Ipil*. His collection of short stories, *Sengel Buru*, was published in 2013 by SLCS, Kolkata, bringing instant literary acclaim and the "Jharkhandi Bhasha Sahitya Sanskriti Award" soon after. His second collection of stories, *Jubdi Disomren "Rebel"* was published in June 2022. He has been associated with editing of Santhali magazines namely, *Jugsirijol* and *Nawa Ipil*. Besides a creative writer he has done some translation work in three languages, Santhali, Hindi and English.

**Hyder, Qurratulain** (1927–2007) was one of the prominent modern Urdu fiction writers. She had four collections of stories, eight novels, four novelettes and several volumes of miscellaneous writings to her credit. She instilled a new sensibility in Urdu fiction and brought in strands of thought and imagination hitherto unexplored. Among the best known of her works are *Aag ka Darya*, *Akhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (novels), *Patjhar ki Awaz* (Short stories) etc.; her works have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages. She was a recipient of Soviet Land Nehru Award, the Iqbal Samman, Sahitya Akademi Award and Jnanpith Award. She was a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi; honoured with Padma Sri and Padma Bhushan.

**Kamil, Amin** (1924–2014) was an eminent Kashmiri writer; his seminal works include *Gati Manz Gaash*, *Yim Myani Sokhan* and *Yim Myani Sokhan*. He was a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Shri.

**Kamleshwar** (1932–2007) was an eminent Hindi fiction writer, script writer and critic; published more than 45 books, which include collections of short stories, novels, criticism and travelogues. He was a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Bhushan among others.

**Kulkarni, G.A.** (1923–1987) was an eminent Marathi short story writer: recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award: a film based on his short story has won five National Awards.

**Kuvempu** (1904–1994) was a doyen of Modern Kannada literature; poet, playwright, novelist and critic; two of his novels are considered as classics in Kannada literature;

recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award and Jnanapith Award for his *Sri Ramayana Darshanam*; recipient of Padma Bhushan, Karnatakarathna, Pampa Prashasti among others.

**Mauzo, Damodar** is a distinguished Konkani fiction writer, critic and script writer. He has authored 16 books of which three are novels and five are short story collections. His book of stories, *Teresa's Man* was nominated for the Frank O'Connor International Award in the year 2015. He has written screenplays and dialogues for Konkani films which bagged awards and some of his stories have also been adapted for the national television. He is the co-curator of the Goa Arts and Literature Festival and founding-member of PEN-South India. He has been honoured with many awards and honours and including Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpith Award.

**Mohanty, Gopinath** (1914–1991) was an eminent Odia novelist; he received Visuva Milan citation in 1950; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 for his prose-epic, *Matimatala* (The Fertile Soil: 1964); was awarded the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1970, and Jnanpith Award and D.Litt. by Sambalpur University in 1976. A recipient of Padma Bhushan, he was an Emeritus Fellow of Government of India for Creative Writing.

**Mohi, Vasdev** (1944–2021) was a noted Sindhi poet and short story writer; also wrote in English, Hindi and Gujarati; had eight collections of poetry and a short story collection to his credit; recipient of Sahitya Akademi award and Kavi Bewas award among others.

**Padmaraju, Palagummi** (1915–1983) was a renowned Telugu writer; had two volumes of short stories, five novels, six plays, a collection of critical essays, besides several radio plays; his works have been translated into many Indian languages and English; recipient of Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi Award and Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of short stories *Galivana* in 1985.

**Premchand** (1880–1936) was a distinguished writer, translator, columnist, and editor. Regarded as the greatest Hindi-Urdu author of the twentieth century, he wrote fourteen novels, three plays, close to three hundred short stories, hundreds of articles,

and a film script in his illustrious career. He is also known for his translations of several European plays. Premchand's works have been translated into several languages across the world and have also been adapted for the screen.

**Priyokumar, Keisham** is an eminent Manipuri fiction writer; some of his significant works are *Nongdi Tarakkhidare*, *Ahing Ama*, and *Awaoba Punshi*; former Editor for *Sahitya* and *Wakhal*; recipient of *Katha Award*, *Sahitya Akademi Award* and *Manipur State Award*.

**Rahi, Ved** (b. 1933) is a distinguished Dogri writer, thinker, poet, novelist, film director and script writer; directed Doordarshan show *Gul*, *Gulshan*, *Gulfam*; his novel *Lal Ded*, based on the life of the Kashmiri saint poetess of the same name, was adjudged the best novel in the Dogri language; he is a recipient of *Sahitya Akademi Award*, *Mahapandit Rahul Sanskritayayan Puraskar*, *Sahitya Akademi Prize for Translation*, *Dinu Bhai Pant Award*, *Kusumagraj Rashtriya Sahitya Puraskar*. He is a Fellow of *Sahitya Akademi*.

**Rai, Indra Bahadur** (1927–2018). Nepali short story writer; some of his important works are *Bipana Katipaya*, *Kathastha*, *Kathputaliko Mann*; his works have also been translated into English as well as into other Indian and foreign languages; recipient of the *Sahitya Akademi Award*.

**Rao, Pandita Kshama** (1890–1954) a celebrated Sanskrit poet of the twentieth century, was the daughter of Prof. S.P. Pandit. She wrote a Gita-like poem on Gandhiji's freedom movement, published from Paris in 1931 under the title *Satyagrahagita*. Later in 1948, she brought out a sequel *Uttara-satyagrahagita*. A volume of her collected short stories was published posthumously as *Kathamuktavali* in 1951. It is from this that the present short story has been selected.

**Senapati, Fakirmohan** (1843–1918) was a distinguished novelist, short-story writer and poet, hailed as the father of Odia prose and fiction; brought out two journals, *Bodhdayini* and *Balasore Sarnbadbahika*; his major contribution consists of the novels, *Chhamana Athaguntha*, *Lachhama*, *Manu* and *Prayaschitta*, *Utkalbrahma* (a long poem of 1300 lines) and a unique

autobiography; he translated the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, *Harivamshapurana* and some Upanishads into Odia; he is the first poet of Odisha who composed lyrics on the life of the tribals and also on ordinary things of life.

**Pillai, Thakazhi Sivasankara** (1912–1999) was a prominent Malayalam fiction writer with 61 published works including novels, short stories, travelogues, plays etc.; his novel *Chemmeen* has been translated into almost all Indian languages and a number of foreign languages; some of his important works are *Rantidangazhi*, *Thottiyude Makan*, *Enippadikal*, *Kayar*, etc.; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award (1965), Soviet Land Nehru Award (1974) and Jnanpith Award (1984); honoured with Padma Bhushan; he was a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi.

**Thakur, Gajendra** is a Maithili short story writer, poet, novelist and critic; also translates from Maithili into English; presently Editor of an e-journal *Videha*; his poems, stories, novels and research articles (all in Maithili) have been anthologised in *Kuru Kshetram Antarmanak*.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

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**Barua, Krishna Dulal:** A teacher of English language and music, he has consistently been translating poetry, fiction and non-fiction from Assamese to English. His translations have appeared in various journals such as *Indian-Literature*, *Chandrabbaga*, *Indian Review*, *poetryinternational.org*, *nezine.com*, etc. His published books of translation include *Selected Poems of Nilmani Phookan*, *The Sword of Birgosri* (novel), both published by Sahitya Akademi, *Select Poems of Lakshminath Bezbaroa*, published by the National Book Trust, etc. He has to his credit two books on music, a collection of articles, *Contours* and a collection of poems, *On and on*. He received the Katha Award for Translation in 2005.

**Bashir, Ishrat:** Translates from Kashmiri to English; she teaches English at Central University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

**Borgave, Deepak:** A Pune based senior academic and translator. He holds a Ph.D. in Translation Studies. He has translated about more than a dozen books.

**Chettri, Anisha:** Scholar specialising in Indian Nepali Literature and Translation Studies. She translates works from Nepali into English.

**Cota, Xavier:** His translated fiction and other articles have appeared in publications like *The Week*, *Man's World*, *Katha Prize Stories* and *Indian Literature*. He has won the Katha Award for Translation.

**Das, Padmalaya:** An Odia short story writer; also translates from Odia into English; worked as Lecturer in English at Utkal University, Cuttack.

**Gehani, Mohan:** A noted Sindhi scholar, playwright, translator and poet. He was among those initial writers' group who struggled to build up Sindhyat movement and worked for inclusion of Sindhi language in the constitution of India. He is the author of numerous books. He is a recipient of several Awards, including Sahitya Akademi award in 2011 and Saeen G M Sayed Memorial Award, London. He has also received awards for his book on History of Sind, Sahitya Akademi translation Prize and Madhya Pradesh Gaurav Award. He was a member of the Sindhi Advisory Board, Sahitya Akademi.

**Hansdak, Ivy:** Poet and translator; has published a collection of poems, *The Golden Chord*; presently teaches English at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**Krishnamoorthy, K.** (1923–1997) had a brilliant academic career at the University of Mysore, and served as Professor and Head of the Department of Sanskrit in the Karnataka University, Dharwad from 1959 to 1984. His well-known publications include *Dhvanyaloka* text critically edited (1982), *Vakroktijivita* text critically edited (1977), monograph on Kalidasa (1972) and independent works like *Essays in Sanskrit Criticism* (1974), *Studies in Indian Aesthetics and Criticism* (1979) and critical edition of Bharata's *Natyasastra* with Abhinavabharati. A recognised authority on Indian poetics, Krishnamoorthy won several research prizes and awards including the President's Certificate of Honour in 1978.

**Leonard, Karen,** is a historian and an anthropologist at the University of California, Irvine. With a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin (1969) on the history of India, she has published on the social history and anthropology of India and also on Punjabi Mexican Americans, South Asian Americans, and Muslim Americans.

**Madan Gopal,** author of *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography* and a pioneer in introducing Hindi writers to the English-speaking

world. He is the author of the monographs on Balmukund Gupta and Bhartendu Harishchandra, published by Sahitya Akademi.

**Mahapatra, Sitakant** (b. 1937): A distinguished Odia poet, critic and translator with more than 100 books to his credit. A former civil servant by profession, Sitakant has earned a reputation for being a scholar, academician, social anthropologist and a literary critic of rare distinction. But his real claim to distinction lies in the field of poetry, for he always considered poetry as an ineluctable part of his life. Winner of the Jnanpith, India's highest literary honour, in 1993, Sitakant has received a flurry of literary awards, including the Kabir Samman, Kumaran Asan award, Soviet Land Nehru award and Rabindranath Tagore Peace award. Sahitya Akademi has honoured him with Fellowship, its highest honour conferred on a living writer, in 2012. He has also received the Padma Bhushan in 2003 and the Padma Vibhushan in 2011, some top civilian awards of India for his contribution to literature. Sitakant has served as Chairman, National Book Trust of India, and as Ombudsman, Reserve Bank of India.

**Maibam, Melbic** was a noted translator. He translated from Manipuri into English and vice versa.

**Mathur, Madan Mohan**: A noted theatre director and academician; recipient of Rajasthan Sangeet Natak Akademi, Rajasthan Sahitya Akademi for his book *Rang-Vividha* and Life Time Achievement Award by Konark Theatre, Cuttack.

**Narang, Gopi Chand** (1931–2022) was a leading Urdu scholar and critic who made seminal contributions to literature, literary criticism and linguistics. As Professor Narang pursued his doctoral degree, he was extremely fortunate to have had the guidance and patronage of some of the brightest minds of that time, including Dr. Zakir Husain, who later became President of India. At the start of a distinguished academic career that took him to different higher learning centres globally, including Wisconsin University at Madison, Minnesota University in Minneapolis, Oslo University in Norway, Professor Narang held high-level academic positions at Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia University, and was President of Sahitya

Akademi during 2003–2007. He received several national and international honours and awards, including Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, from the President of India.

**Phukan, Mitra:** Novelist, short fiction and children's writer, translates from Assamese into English; Her published literary works include four children's books, a biography, three novels; has done playback singing for Assamese films and is a discerning music critic.

**Pramanik, Arun:** Teaches English at Gour Vishwavidyalaya, West Bengal; has published articles both in national and international journals. Translates from Bengali to English.

**Raghunath, M.S.:** Translates between Kannada and English; has translated selected European stories into Kannada and Kannada stories into English.

**Rammurty, A.V.**, a noted translator (Kashmiri and Dogri into English) who regularly contributed to the various journals including *Indian Literature*.

**Raman, N. Kalyan:** A noted translator of contemporary Tamil fiction and poetry into English. Over the past 25 years, he has published 13 volumes of Tamil fiction in translation, by important writers. His translation of Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi* was shortlisted for the inaugural of JCB Prize in 2019 and nominated for the National Book Foundation Award in the US in 2020. He is a recipient of Pudumaipithan Award and Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize.

**Sarma, Joykanta:** A journalist by profession; has authored 20 books, both in English and Assamese, including four edited works, *Modern Bodo Short Stories* and *Rabha Folk Tales*.

**Sharma, Seema:** A Fulbright Postdoctoral Scholar at Stanford University, where she was engaged in research and teaching. She has taught undergraduate and graduate classes for 25 years in several universities in India. Her areas of interest are American Literature, African American Literature, Postcolonial Literatures, Translation Studies and Indian Mythology. Her

book *Articulating Resistance in African American Slave Narratives* was published in 2011. She translates creative and critical works from Hindi into English.

**Shukla, Suresh K.**, a noted translator who regularly contributed to the various journals including *Indian Literature*.

**Verghese, C. Paul** taught English at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla and was engaged in a study of Commonwealth literature.

# Indian Stories

Volume 1

Compiled and Edited by  
K. Sreenivasarao

# INDIAN Stories

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**Indian Stories (Volume 1)** is a compilation of selected short stories from various Indian languages in English translation. This volume is not a mere collection of stories but reflect the social conditions and value systems and as a collection highlight how they changed over the past six decades. Selection of stories from various Indian languages ensure the proper reflection of vastness of Indian cultural traditions and all the stories in the compilation have sufficient universal elements that make them relevant to the present time and also other cultures. The stories in the volume are truly the stories of India over a period of time and mystical element rises through the tales as the past and present meet. Dynamism, wisdom and humanness in the stories make them relevant for ages. This is the first volume in the series and each volume has been planned to represent different facets of Indian culture.

**K. Sreenivasarao** a thinker, scholar, literary expert, administrator with the experience of over three decades in several positions of literary management and administration at a national level literary institution. Born in 1965, K. Sreenivasarao is the Secretary of Sahitya Akademi since February 2013. He is the author of *Myths, Plays & Girish Karnad*, *Bhartiya Sahitya aur Sanskriti*, and has edited a book *Vitasta: Uniting Cultures*. His forthcoming publication is *The Paradoxical India: Reflections on Indian Literature and Culture*. He is the recipient of Delhi Telugu Akademi Award in 2011; Kinnera Ugadi Puraskaram in 2017, Bharitya Vangmaya Peeth Award for the Excellence in Administration in 2018, Nandi Sewa Trust's Srijan Shikhar Samman in 2024 and was honoured with D. Litt by Shaheed Mahendra Karma Vishwavidyalaya, Chhattisgarh.

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